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DEATH IN THE 13TH DOSE

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DEATH IN THE 13TH DOSE

by
BELTON COBB

Author of
"Double Detection"
"No Alibi"
etc.

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A Welcome for
JEREMY PHILIP DAVID SNOW
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CHAPTER ONE

For the first forty miles along the road to Avonbridge, Detective-Inspector Cheviot Burmann listened in silence while I discoursed, somewhat brilliantly and at times not without wit, on the methods which a detective should use in a murder case.

Then, suddenly and in fact cutting me off in the middle of a sentence, he said, "Look here, Sergeant Ross. I know it's a dull job being a passenger in a car, particularly for a chap who isn't used to much constructive thought. So I've let you ramble on. But for goodness sake don't carry on in that vein when we get started on this case. I've found a dozen murderers in my time and only once before have I taken a sergeant with me. Frankly, I think sergeants are a nuisance and I much prefer to work on my own. But I thought I'd give you a chance to learn how things are done, now that you are back at the Yard. No, that's all right," he hurried on, apparently meaning to forestall an outburst of gratitude, "only don't make it too painful for me by teaching me my job. All you have to do is to look official and take notes—and to keep your mouth shut and not bother me by pointing out the obvious or making asinine suggestions. Understand, Sergeant Ross?"

Of course I knew exactly what he was getting at. Once upon a time I was a promising young detective-sergeant at Scotland Yard, with a Chief Commissioner's truncheon in my knapsack. In 1939, with

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

pats on the back from my superiors, I joined the army. In 1940 I came home, via Dunkirk, with a piece of shrapnel in my head. Then the Yard refused to reinstate me, on the ground that my wound "might involve a certain degree of mental instability"—in other words, they thought me gaga. But in 1943 a man was murdered in an hotel where I was staying, and Inspector Burmann and I solved the case between us. As Burmann got all the credit for that and my part looked like being ignored, I took advantage of his exuberance at the end of the case, inviting him to my flat where I fawned on him and my wife did the feminine stuff till he consented to tell the high-ups at the Yard that I could again be useful to them. So I got back my old rank.

What Cheviot meant now was that a man who had once been suspected of being gaga couldn't be regarded subsequently as intelligent. He would be kind to me, but the barrier between the sane and the insane must be preserved.

That, of course, was all very reasonable; but in this case the sane man had smoked the imbecile's gaspers, drunk the imbecile's British port-type wine and had eyes made at him by the imbecile's wife. That kind of thing makes a difference and renders the official tone a little out of place. So when he had finished I put Inspector Burmann in his place by answering, "Yes, Cheviot." My assumption that the relationship between us was such that I was entitled to use his Christian name made him give an agonized grunt and reduced him to silence. But all the same I didn't strain our friendship by continuing my lecture.

When we reached Avonbridge, we called at the

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Police Station and saw Superintendent Lanfier, a doddering old boy who did not seem to like being interrupted in his studies of traffic reports but nevertheless appeared glad, after he had grasped what we had come for, to hand over to us. He gave us the low-down on it all.

Six miles outside Avonbridge, he explained, there was a converted farmhouse. Since near the beginning of the war, it had been the offices of the Albion Pictures Unit, which produced coloured photographs of the principal beauties of England—landscapes, seascapes, cathedrals, timbered houses and so on. The staff of the Unit lived as well as worked at the farm, and in its common-room a Mrs. Vance had died six days before of cyanide poisoning.

According to Lanfier, she had been a perfectly charming old dame, eighty-four years old, tottery and beginning to fail in health, but kind and considerate and a general favourite. The sort of person whom no one could conceivably want to murder. Yet someone had put cyanide of potassium into her bottle of medicine. Everyone in the house knew it was hers, Lanfier said, nobody else was taking any medicine at all, and she had herself taken half the doses in the bottle without ill-effects. Those three facts ruled out the possibility that the poison had been intended for someone else: there was no doubt at all that someone had deliberately murdered this harmless and agreeable old lady.

I wanted to ask, of course, whether it was manpower shortage that had compelled this business company to employ octogenarian ladies on its staff. But the point didn't seem to bother Cheviot, and it was just as well that I didn't incur his wrath by butting

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

in with a question, because Lanfier went on to explain matters.

Her son Charles, he said, was employed in the Albion Pictures Unit, and Salaman, the proprietor, had allowed the old lady to live there.

"I suppose you'll want to start by suspecting Charles Vance," Lanfier said, "because his mother left him £8,000. That's admitted. But I don't think it applies. Charles is a quiet sort of chap, quite contented in a decently paid job, a bachelor aged forty-five with no expensive tastes and no wild ambitions. As a matter of fact, I've known him personally for some months and I can vouch for him as a thoroughly decent fellow who was genuinely fond of his mother. If you can imagine a man like that killing his own mother for the sake of getting £8,000 which was coming to him anyway in a year or two at the outside—the doctor had told him that she wouldn't live longer than that—well, you're a bigger cynic than I am. Matricide is a nasty thing."

I saw Cheviot bristling like a cat that sees the sparrow with a broken wing. Of course Lanfier couldn't know it, but, Cheviot being the man he is, there was hardly a word in that statement that didn't help to place Charles Vance as Suspect No. 1.

There were seven people besides Salaman at the farm, Lanfier went on: Charles Vance; Bryan Malcolm, whose wife had acted as housekeeper since the death of Mrs. Salaman two years before; a younger man named Nevil Church; and three girls, Mrs. Rackstraw, Miss Bloss and Salaman's daughter Joan. There were no resident servants, the housework being done by women from the village who came in for the mornings only. As the poison must have been laid

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

between two in the afternoon, when Mrs. Vance took the last unpoisoned dose of her medicine, and eight the same evening, when she took the one that killed her, only the eight people living at the farm came into the enquiry.

We drove after that to Avonside Farm. The farmhouse was a low, white-washed building surrounded by others which I suppose had once been cowsheds, toolsheds and whatnot but were now converted into the living-quarters of the staff. The main building stood by itself, the rest being grouped round the yard.

After Cheviot had rung the bell, the door was opened by a gaunt, schoolmistressy woman of doubtful middle-age who said as soon as she had heard his name, "Oh. Well, I suppose you must come in. But all these enquiries are a great nuisance in the house. I will fetch Mr. Salaman."

She showed us into a very decently furnished sitting-room which seemed halfway between a drawing-room and an hotel lounge: presumably the common-room in which Mrs. Vance had drunk the poison. We were just getting our bearings when the door was opened to admit a white-haired man with a sort of pompous geniality. Except that he wore a Gladstone collar and a large yellow tie in a bow with the ends hanging loose, I should have put him down as a Nonconformist parson on holiday: but the tie was definitely "arty"—and quite horrible.

He came forward exuberantly with arms outstretched and put his hands almost affectionately on Cheviot's elbows.

"Well, this is good of you!" he exclaimed. "I hadn't dreamt, when Superintendent Lanfier told me he was getting help from Scotland Yard, that you

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

would come so quickly to help us out of our predicament. Or isn't that quite the right way to put it? Of course you aren't here to help us, are you? But anything you do will have that effect, for there is nothing we all want so much as to have this matter cleared up."

Cheviot said, "There is presumably one person who doesn't."

"I know," Salaman answered. "Do sit down, won't you? That is the astounding thing, that the murderer must be one of *us*. We've been such a family—we are, yes, of course, we are still. You wouldn't believe that we were just a business company, the directors and our employees. But of course we are. And yet we are not. That's why I don't call it a company, I call it a Unit. 'Unity in the Unit': that's our motto. There's no friction, dog trying to eat dog, we all work for the same ideal, we work together in every sense."

"How nice," said Cheviot. "But not easy when people set up homes here. You may choose the men for their easy-going temperaments as much as for their technical skill, but their wives are not your choice at all."

"There is only one wife here," said Salaman. "Mrs. Malcolm, who opened the door to you just now. A most charming woman, didn't you think so? Bryan Malcolm, an excellent fellow, was here for three years by himself. Then, after my poor wife died, I arranged to meet Mrs. Malcolm. I liked her, saw that she would be in harmony with us, and offered them No. 3 Flat. If I had had any doubts, I wouldn't have done that. Unity in the Unit is all-important."

"Then," Cheviot suggested, "it must have been a bad shock when unity was broken by murder. Did

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

you inspect Mrs. Vance before she came to live here?"

"Of course. Or rather, no. Before the war she lived in London with Charles, who has been with me ever since I started the Unit. When we moved here in 1940, it didn't seem right to take him away to safety and make him leave her in a dangerous London. I'm very glad she came with us. Or am I? Of course, if she had stayed in London, she might have been bombed; but she would not have been murdered. That was most horrible, Inspector. A ghastly form of death; I had had no idea that the results of cyanide could be so terrible."

"I'll have to get you to tell me about it," said Cheviot. "Begin at the beginning, or as far back as you can. There was a bottle of medicine, wasn't there? Who supplied it?"

"Dr. Morgan. He lives at Arkington, three miles away. He comes—I'm sorry, he came—every two or three months to see Mrs. Vance, although there was nothing the matter with her except her age. Last time, he thought less well of her, she was failing, he didn't think she would last very long. To help her he gave her this medicine. I don't know what was in it, of course, but I imagine it was fairly strong, for the label said she was to take teaspoon doses."

"I must tell you," Salaman went on, "that Mrs. Vance wasn't fond of taking medicine. Usually, she would forget to go on after two or three doses, or perhaps she didn't forget; anyway she would leave it alone. She was a most gentle creature, but the one thing that made her a trifle petulant was being reminded about her medicine. This time, we *had* to remind her. Dr. Morgan had impressed that on Charles and on me."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Well, on the fourth day, after breakfast, Mrs. Vance ignored her medicine. Charles reminded her, but she said no, she didn't want it. After lunch she refused it again. She was really quite like a child. She said she didn't like it, it had a nasty bitter taste. After dinner we all tried to persuade her because I had told the others how important it was. My daughter Joan, a sweet child with a most sympathetic temperament, suggested she should have something after it to take the taste away, only nobody had any sweets. And then I had what seemed rather a good idea. I knew there were some little bottles in the kitchen, used for flavouring things, and I suggested adding a few drops from one of them to the medicine. Everyone agreed that that was a good plan, and even Mrs. Vance didn't positively object. So I went to see what I could find. I had imagined——"

Cheviot interrupted him. "Why did you go yourself instead of sending Mrs. Malcolm? Aren't kitchen matters her job?"

Salaman raised a deprecating hand and became a bit more unctuous than ever. "Oh, my dear fellow. It was eight o'clock in the evening and Mrs. Malcolm works hard for us all day. Naturally, for a little thing like that I couldn't have asked her to rise from a comfortable chair. Not possibly. I certainly wouldn't——"

He broke off suddenly and was silent for a moment. "Or rather, no," he went on. "That is not accurate. It is what I would most certainly have felt in other circumstances, in ordinary circumstances. So much so that I gave you that answer automatically, without thinking, without remembering. But as a matter of fact Mrs. Malcolm was not with us then. She was in

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

London on a fortnight's holiday, very well deserved, in fact quite necessary for her health. I had insisted on her taking it."

"Was she away when Mrs. Vance died?" asked Cheviot.

"Oh no, she came back that day, about noon."

"Not an alibi, then," Cheviot remarked. "I was hoping you were reducing the number of my possible suspects. Never mind. Go on with your story. You had just gone into the kitchen."

"Yes. Yes, I went into the kitchen. I had expected to find several bottles, lemon, orange and so forth, but there was only one—essence of almonds—so I brought that. We've had it in puddings and I knew it was fairly strong, so I thought it would do. I poured a little into the medicine bottle and——"

If Cheviot had let that pass, I should have risked a tell-off by prompting him. But luckily he was quite awake.

"Why into the bottle?" he demanded. "Wouldn't it have been wiser to have put the essence into the glass, in case she didn't like it?"

Salaman seemed startled. "Dear me," he said. "Yes, I suppose it would. Very much more sensible, but I'm afraid it didn't occur to me. However, it made no difference, because Mrs. Vance said the medicine was quite nice like that, in fact, after taking it, she even smiled and said she would like some more. But of course she couldn't have that.

"She had two more doses after breakfast and lunch the next day—I mean one dose after each meal, of course. Then after dinner she took it again, just as usual—and immediately she gave the most frantic gasps and then collapsed and became unconscious.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Her eyes were wide open and staring; most uncanny, terrible, horrible, those eyes staring out of a dead white face. She gasped in a series of convulsions—I really cannot describe it. I think she died within a minute or two."

"Then," said Cheviot, "you sent for the doctor, I suppose?"

"Yes, though I knew she was dead. He came in about half an hour. He told me to send for the police. He said she had been poisoned, he thought it was prussic acid. It wasn't till after the post-mortem that we learnt that it was cyanide of potassium which had somehow got into the medicine."

"It can hardly have 'got in' unless it was deliberately put in," Cheviot remarked crushingly. "As you do photography here, I suppose you keep some cyanide on the premises?"

"Yes, of course. The police took possession of the bottle which is kept in our dark room, and a comparison with our records showed that several grains were missing."

He pressed his elbows in against his sides, as if he were suddenly cold.

"I feel very guilty," he said. "That suggestion of mine, which seemed so good, so helpful, at the time, was most unfortunate as things turned out. You know, I suppose, that cyanide of potassium smells strongly of almonds, so that Mrs. Vance would undoubtedly have noticed and objected, but for the essence. And if she had done, if she had not taken that last dose—— But as it was, because of my action—so well-intentioned, but so unfortunate—she expected the medicine to smell strongly of almonds, so she had no suspicions. If I had not had that idea, had not done that——"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Wait a minute," said Cheviot, putting a stop to these vapourings and getting down to business again. "This implies that the murderer acted on impulse because an easy way of murder was presented to him. He cannot have decided to kill Mrs. Vance more than eight hours before he did kill her. This may give me a direct line on him. Who knew about the essence of almonds? Who was present when you added it?"

"We all were. We were in here, having our coffee."

"Except Mrs. Malcolm," said Cheviot. "But her husband probably told her when she got back, or at any rate he may have done, so she can't be ruled out. Who, after that incident, had a chance to get cyanide out of the dark room?"

"You must ask Nevil Church, who works there. A delightful boy, by the way, so very natural and unaffected. I am really very lucky in my staff, Inspector, most charming people, all of them."

"They include a murderer, Mr. Salaman," Cheviot retorted, shortly. Then, after a second, he added, "At least, presumably they do."

Salaman did not seem to see the point of that addition, for it only set him off on another chapter of his remarks on the impossibility of believing . . . Unity in the Unit . . . such delightful people, and so on. The logical argument that if his staff did not include a murderer he must be the murderer himself did not seem to have touched him.

Cheviot let him ramble for a moment and then said, "All this sounds too good to be true. Isn't there the usual office jealousy over promotions?"

"None. Absolutely nothing of the sort. We have the perfect team spirit. I will give you an example.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

In a year I intend to retire. But the Unit will go on, and you will see what I mean when I tell you that Bryan Malcolm told me one day that Charles Vance was the right man to succeed me; and a day or two later Charles came and said I must choose Bryan. You see? The perfect team spirit!"

"And whom did you decide to appoint as your successor?"

"Bryan. He has not been with us so long as Charles, but I think he will continue the Unit more strictly on my lines."

"Have you told Vance that?"

"I announced it to everyone. I remember that Charles went across at once and congratulated Bryan. Then he came to me and said he knew I had made the best choice."

"Putting a good face on it," Cheviot murmured.

"I can assure you he was genuinely pleased," Salaman insisted. "He and Bryan have been the closest friends for six years. They are as devoted to one another to-day as ever they were. After my retirement, Charles will be Bryan's chief assistant—in name, that is, but actually they will work together as partners."

"But with Malcolm getting the credit and a share in the profits," said Cheviot, "while Charles gets neither. Still, even if Charles Vance is bitterly jealous, I don't see that that is a reason why he should have given cyanide to his mother."

CHAPTER TWO

SOMEWHERE in the building a gong sounded. Salaman said, "Ah, that is for lunch and Mrs. Malcolm doesn't like us to be late. Naturally, yes, of course. You will join us, Inspector, won't you? We shall be delighted."

No one, it seemed, was going to be equally delighted by *my* presence at lunch, and I was left to assume that in the doubtful event of Salaman having noticed my existence at all he must be taking it for granted that I would feed in the kitchen, or outside with the dog. But duty, represented by my notebook, forced me to intrude myself on his hospitality and follow close on Cheviot's heels.

Salaman led the way down a passage and threw open a door at its far end. I saw a large, raftered room which in previous days must have been the main barn of Avonside Farm: it still bore a barn's characteristics in spite of having been skilfully converted into a dining-room. Floorboards had been laid down, polished and covered with rugs, and the Jacobean furniture included a sideboard, a refectory table and forms. But the feature which caught the eye at once, somewhat discordantly, was a set of very large dark-framed photographs in colour of English scenery.

Or rather, no, as Salaman would have put it. The feature which caught my eye at once was not the set of photographs, but a girl, young, small, not too thin, and with first-rate legs. Naturally I quickened up,

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

getting ahead of Cheviot (who probably thought that I was merely wolping at the food) in order to see whether the face was worthy of those ankles. Unfortunately, as too often happens, it wasn't. If I had been a map-artist wanting a model for one of those heads which appear in the corners of fancy maps to represent the north wind and so on, I should probably have got busy with the pencil at once, since the noticeable thing about those heads is that they are all fat cheeks and no expression. Pretty, I suppose, if you like that kind of thing, but of no use to me.

There was another girl in the room, however, who was a stunner. The only trouble with her was that she so obviously knew it, and had known it and made every possible use of it for about twenty years, since she first crawled out of her cot and looked in a mirror. I don't know when I've seen a twenty-two-year-old girl looking more completely hard-boiled.

There were two other women in the room, Mrs. Malcolm and a bespectacled creature of thirty-five or so who had scraped back her hair to reveal an enormous forehead, and consequently looked quite crushingly intelligent. There were also three men.

Salaman went to the head of the table and stood leaning over the back of his chair, with the manner of an after-dinner speaker. He beamed on the seven members of his staff for a moment: then he said oilily, "My friends, may I just interrupt you for a few seconds, then you can go on with your meal? Here is Detective-Inspector Burmann of Scotland Yard, who has been good enough to come down especially to help us in our trouble. I know you all feel about that as I do—we want to clear up a most unpleasant mystery as soon as possible."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

The youngest of the three men said "Hear hear, hear hear," and rapped loudly on the table with his fork until a venomous look from Mrs. Malcolm reminded him that he was spoiling both the silver and the polished oak. Salaman turned to Cheviot (still, it seemed, without noticing me) and said, "I must introduce you personally to Charles Vance, who knows how deeply we all feel for him," and a squat little fellow stood up gravely and bowed without speaking. The man opposite to Charles Vance began edging sideways along the form, moving his plate and cutlery with him. "Squash in here, won't you, Inspector," he said. "I'm Bryan Malcolm. And——" He broke off suddenly and stared at me so hard that my growing impression that I had become invisible suddenly vanished. "You've only done half the honours, Mr. Salaman," he said. "Is this more of Scotland Yard?"

Salaman said, "Oh, ah," and became aware of me. He said "Ah?" again, questioningly and helplessly, to Cheviot, who murmured "Sergeant Ross," and sat down. Salaman beamed at me and said, "Delightful!" spoiling the effect a second later by adding, "Two detectives, really this is most gratifying."

Malcolm said, "You'd better squash in too, the more the merrier. And I'll go on with the introductions. This"—and he turned to the hard-boiled girl who sat beside him—"is Joan Salaman. Then, 'seated from left to right' as they say in captions, there are Nevil Church" (the table-rapper), "Mrs. Rack, real name Rackstraw, only nobody uses it" (the forehead and intelligence) "and Miss Flossie Bloss, known as Blossie for short" (calves but negligible face). "Seated, behind tureen, my wife. And 'standing,'

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Mr. Salaman. That's the lot; including Charles and myself, eight in all."

Of course it was natural that we were objects of interest, to be stared at. While the lower strata of society generally regard detectives as unpleasant and nosey, the upper strata (as a result of having subscriptions at lending libraries) regard us as vaguely romantic and are thrilled to meet us in the flesh, though a little disappointed that in plain clothes we look so profoundly ordinary. These people reacted to Cheviot and me much as I should have expected from their apparent characters. Charles Vance ignored us and brooded sadly over his soup; Bryan Malcolm continued to look friendly, pressing on us unnecessary salt and pepper; Joan Salaman gazed at Cheviot as if her dream-man had arrived at last; Mrs. Rack contrived to look as if she was above common curiosity but was prepared to deal suitably with any signs of intelligence we might show; Salaman beamed on the company generally; Mrs. Malcolm glowered at us and appeared to be calculating that she hadn't enough lunch for two extra people; Nevil Church showed unaffected human interest; and Miss Bloss gazed at us with wide eyes, as if she was visiting the zoo and had come across two new and unbelievable specimens of natural history.

Then, just as Mrs. Malcolm rose with a despairing sigh and began to clear the plates, Miss Bloss burst into a fit of the giggles.

Bryan said, "Thank goodness. Tension becoming unbearable, in spite of my gallant efforts to show disinterest. Now we can be human again. Tell us the joke, Blossie."

Miss Bloss giggled and said, "It's not funny at all,

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

it's my nerves." She stopped and giggled again. "I'm frightened, that's all," she said. "I expect they've made up their minds about us already. Our characters, I mean."

"Nobody could read your character, Blossie," said Bryan Malcolm. "You haven't one."

Mrs. Rackstraw snorted like the proverbial war-horse and charged at once into intelligent conversation.

"My dear Bryan," she said, leaning earnestly forward, "that is a preposterous remark. Everyone has character, it is an essential facet of human existence. If you mean that Blossie's characteristics are not very pronounced, that is true of course. But that is her character: she is vague, shapeless——"

"Oh, I deny that," cried Bryan, "she has a very nice shape."

It seemed to me that Mrs. Malcolm didn't like that remark: I daresay that, being somewhat sack-like herself, Blossie's exciting curves were a sore point.

"Anyway," said Joan Salaman, who certainly had no cause for that kind of jealousy, "Blossie is very good-tempered. I think you are being very unkind, Mrs. Rack. So are you, Bryan. Blossie is sweet and there is no need to tease her."

"Quite right," said Nevil Church. "It's a rotten way to talk about a girl, anyway. Let's go on with what we were discussing."

"Better not," cried Bryan. "These detectives will get a pretty low opinion of your intelligence, Nevil, if you go on with that tripe you were talking just before they came in."

"The point I wanted to make——" Nevil began, but Bryan interrupted.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"We all know your point," he declared. "You claim that love is a holy emotion that only comes once in a lifetime. A noble sentiment, Nevil. I suppose it is designed to impress the young and innocent with the purity of your thoughts. Only it's a waste of time, at the moment, because there's nobody here who comes into the 'young and innocent' category. Unless," he added, "Inspector Burmann is that sort of person." Then he looked doubtfully at me, "Or possibly Sergeant Ross," he said.

"Don't sidetrack," said Mrs. Rackstraw. "If you don't agree with Nevil you ought to be able to put up a logical argument against him."

"Hardly worth while," said Bryan. "He talks such absolute rot. 'Once in a lifetime,' indeed. Look at all the re-marriages. Look at Henry VIII."

"That's exactly my point," cried Nevil heatedly. "Obviously Henry VIII wasn't in love."

"Of course he was—at first," Bryan retorted. "On his various bridal nights he was as good a lover as anyone. And that's what matters, not merely the length of time it lasts." He turned suddenly to Joan. "Isn't that right, Joan?" he demanded.

Joan laughed. "One glorious hour," she quoted. "Yes, a little real feeling is worth more than a lot of—of——"

"Half-hearted, fish-like habit," Bryan suggested. "Exactly."

"But real love isn't half-hearted," cried Nevil, apparently near to tears. "It's big and fine and—and lasting. I'm sure Joan doesn't believe——"

"Well, she ought to know what she believes," Bryan put in. "Anyway, it's just natural——"

Salaman interrupted him. "This is a most interest-

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

ing discussion," he said. "I hope we shall go on with it another time. But we must remember our guests, who are busy people and no doubt have other calls on their time. I expect they will want to see you all separately and I will leave the common-room to them for that purpose. Perhaps in the meantime it will be helpful if we talk of poor Mrs. Vance and what she meant to us all."

"Anyway," said Joan, "we shan't disagree about that. We all think she was adorable."

"Absolutely," said Bryan.

Miss Bloss said "Oh, she was simply sweet," and Mrs. Rackstraw said, "Yes. When younger she must have been a remarkable woman. I admired her." Nevil Church said, "I was very fond of her. She was always very kind to me." Mrs. Malcolm said, "Nobody could possibly say a word against her." Charles Vance looked down at his plate in silence, apparently acutely embarrassed.

"And I have already told the Inspector," said Salaman, "what I felt about her. Or haven't I? Perhaps not in so many words. But she was almost perfect in her saint-like kindliness and sweetness of temper. A remarkable woman, as Mrs. Rack says. Yes, a sweet and remarkable woman."

Cheviot, meanwhile, seemed to be getting impatient. His jerk of the head at me conveyed the impression that he thought matters would be speeded up if I went and held open the door for his exit.

Miss Bloss suddenly said, "Have we got to be interviewed *alone*? I'd get on ever so much better if we weren't. My nerves, you know. When I'm asked a whole lot of questions one after another, I get terri-

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

fied and then I forget things, I mean my mind goes a complete blank."

"But there's not a bit of need to be frightened," said Nevil. "All one has to do is to tell the complete truth. We can all do that."

Charles Vance looked up sharply and stared at Nevil. Then, looking at no one in particular, he said slowly, "That remark is sheer nonsense. I find it very difficult to sit here quietly and listen to that kind of thing. Somebody will certainly not tell the truth. I don't see that we gain anything by refusing to look that in the face. Somebody—one of you—has killed my mother. I don't know why, I can't imagine why. But it is so, we all know it is so. Whoever it is has been lying ever since. One of those statements just now about my mother being so adorable was just damnable hypocrisy."

"Oh, good Lord!" cried Bryan.

CHAPTER THREE

CHEVIOT got up in the middle of the awful silence that followed, and strode out of the room; and of course I trotted dutifully behind him. I noticed that he had not summoned anyone into the common-room, but probably that was just a bit of Gestapo work, to take advantage of their disturbed minds and keep them on tenterhooks.

I had already decided how Cheviot would start work on the case. He firmly believes that a detective should be a cynic. Consequently, Lanfier's remark that cynicism was necessary for suspecting Charles Vance would have seemed like a challenge to his pet philosophy. As Lanfier had also cut across another of Cheviot's favourite ideas by refusing to suspect Charles because he knew him personally, Charles Vance was definitely a marked man. Cheviot, in fact, would be already prejudiced *against* Charles, because Superintendent Lanfier was prejudiced in his favour; prejudice, in Cheviot's view, being unworthy of a policeman.

For a time I had thought that Cheviot might curb his instincts and go after Salaman, who—to a really unprejudiced eye, such as mine—seemed just the sort of person one would like to hang. But I gathered from his last words before lunch that he was still his old self, determined to put a superintendent in his place even if logic compelled him to find a stronger motive than the one which Lanfier also considered insufficient.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Consequently I was a trifle disappointed when Cheviot said, "I shall start on Bryan Malcolm. Go and get him, and tell me afterwards if he says anything important on the way here: but don't get chatty with him."

I found Bryan still in the dining-room, arguing with Mrs. Rackstraw. When I gave him Cheviot's message, he said, "I wonder if it is an honour to be the first. Or is he only trying to get the unimportant people out of the way before he deals with those that matter? I suppose you are counting on being the last, aren't you, Mrs. Rack?"

He got out of the room before she could reply and went down the passage, cheerfully humming "The Campbells are Coming."

"Sit down, Mr. Malcolm," said Cheviot. "So you are the future head of Albion Pictures Unit?"

"That's right," answered Bryan. "Salaman told you, I suppose?"

"Is it a limited company?" Cheviot asked.

"Yes. The original shareholders were Salaman and his wife and a friend. When Mrs. Salaman died, the friend dropped out and Joan Salaman and Charles Vance joined the board. Salaman holds £15,000 in shares, Joan has £1,000, and Charles, having no money of his own, holds a qualifying share of £100 out of Salaman's capital. The Unit has been able to work on a small capital because it started with a stock of negatives which Salaman put in without charge. Soon we shall expand: I am putting in £10,000 which will help that along."

"That is very clear," said Cheviot. "Will Mr. Salaman remain a director after he gives up the management?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

It seemed to me that Bryan hesitated. Then he said, "He certainly hasn't told me he won't. I haven't raised the point with him."

"You mean you fancy he may be considering it?" Cheviot suggested. "If he does decide to go out, I imagine he will dispose of his shares."

"I shan't have them," said Bryan. "Ten thousand pounds is the limit of my cash."

"Then there'll be a chance for Mr. Vance. It would be silly for him to remain a director in name only, now that he is coming into a legacy of £8,000. With that at his disposal he will be able to escape the rather invidious position he would be in when you take over and not only become managing director more or less over his head, but also hold £10,000 of the capital while he holds nothing. In fact it is very lucky for him that this legacy is coming to him just at exactly the right moment."

Bryan looked at him quickly. "Do you think so?" he asked. "It might be for some people, but Charles doesn't worry about money."

"Then I shall be interested to meet him," said Cheviot. "A rare type, obviously. But if he doesn't value money, I expect he is all the more concerned about position. The £8,000 will strengthen his position a great deal in the company—sorry, I mean the Unit. So, as I say, it has come to him at just the right time."

Bryan said, "Oh. I don't like the way you say that. I gather you aren't any sort of a fool—you wouldn't hold your position if you were—so I imagine that when you appear to mean something, that is exactly what you do mean. But it's nasty, very nasty. A frightful idea, in fact. Charles isn't that sort of man

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

at all. He could not conceivably murder his mother in order to get hold of £8,000 of capital. Or £80,000 or £800,000 for that matter. You don't know him, and you may not believe that; but it is a fact nevertheless. And anyway—in case the argument appeals to you more—it wouldn't have been in the least necessary. He got on frightfully well with his mother and she would have given him anything he asked for."

"I don't feel sure of that," said Cheviot. "I imagine that when he got his directorship, he wouldn't have been content to qualify for it only by holding a nominal share as a trustee, when his mother possessed £8,000, unless she had refused to use her capital on his behalf. Later, when it became obvious that Salaman was considering retiring and appointing his successor, he must have seen that his longer service would be outbalanced by your having £10,000 to put in while he had nothing. So again, I imagine, he asked his mother for money. Apparently she again refused—and you got the appointment. But even then, though he was passed over, Vance could have established his position—especially if Salaman was going to sell out—by getting his hands on that £8,000. Obviously there was no point in asking for it again. But—well, his mother died, as I said just now, at exactly the right moment."

"Oh, hell!" cried Bryan.

"Mind you," remarked Cheviot, in a way which I suppose he thought disarming, "I am merely thinking aloud and working out a possible theory. I am certain to work out a dozen others before I am through with this case, and only one of them will be right."

"Well, this one certainly isn't," Bryan insisted. "It's

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

damnable logical, of course I can see that, but nevertheless it is utterly wrong. I don't mean in the facts, most of which are fairly right, though you got at them by sheer guesswork. But the conclusion is altogether wrong. Charles did ask his mother for money, just as you say, and twice she refused. But when he asked a third time—this is where you are wrong—she did what he wanted."

"She gave him the money?"

"Promised to let him have it whenever he wanted it. So her death didn't make any difference to him—in that way."

"I think, Mr. Malcolm," said Cheviot, "you had better tell me the whole story."

"I suppose I've got to," Bryan answered, "only I wish you had got it direct from Charles. Can't you do that?"

"I probably shall," said Cheviot. "But I would like your version as well."

"Oh, all right," said Bryan. "Only for goodness sake don't make it public. I mean, don't go blurting it out to Salaman, or to anyone who will tell him. You'll do Charles and me a mighty lot of harm if you do—and you'll see in a minute that it has nothing to do with your enquiry."

He took out his cigarette case and selected a cigarette.

"Salaman is a genius in his way," he began, "and I doubt if anyone else could have started the Unit and have done all he did for it in its first years. But for all that he is quite out-of-date now and business is going downhill.

"If the Unit is to be saved it has got to be run very differently—in fact in a way that is quite contrary to

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Salaman's ideas. Charles has seen that and has told Salaman so many times, but the old man won't hear of it. I've seen it too, but I haven't said anything: I knew, you see, that if he wouldn't listen to Charles he certainly wouldn't listen to me. But oddly enough I think that that—my refraining from criticizing—is the main reason why he has picked on me, and not Charles, to succeed him. My capital has nothing to do with it: he just thinks I will carry on on his own lines. Which is rather funny!

"I couldn't carry on at all if my hands were tied in that way: I should merely see the business dying under my control. So Charles and I have got a scheme. As soon as I take charge, I shall go to Salaman, butter him up a bit about the soundness of his ideas, and say that we ought to make still more of them, expand the whole Unit and do the same things on a much bigger scale. He trusts me, thinks I'm thoroughly imbued with his ideas, and anyway it is the sort of proposal he would like, so he's pretty certain to fall for it. Bigger expansion would justify more capital, of course, and I shall tell him I can bring in about £7,000 more without increasing the directorate. He'll like that, too, because he would be afraid that having a new person in would mar his blessed nonsense about 'Unity in the Unit.' Then I shall do a bit better than I said, producing £7,500 or even the whole £8,000. Salaman, of course, won't know till everything is signed and sealed that the money comes from Charles: and then it will be too late. Charles will have a holding of £8,000 and I'll have my £10,000—that's £18,000 against £16,000 divided between Salaman and Joan. So as voting is by shares Charles and I will be on top and able to

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

decide the policy of the Unit. Charles will propose our new ideas, and I shall back him up, and there won't be a thing that Salaman can do about it. Except get out, of course, and if he does that—though I think it is *when* he does that—I shall get a pal of mine to buy his shares, and Charles and my friend and I will run the Unit as it ought to be run."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Very clever, Mr. Malcolm. And supposing I find it necessary in the course of my enquiry to mention this scheme to Mr. Salaman?"

"If I had thought you that sort of cad I wouldn't have told you," Bryan retorted. "And even with the good opinion I've got of you, I wouldn't have taken the risk if it hadn't seemed absolutely necessary to silence your foul suspicion that Charles murdered his mother."

"I don't think you have done that," Cheviot said. "On the contrary, you've supplied a very good motive against him. He needed that money even more than I thought."

"He needed it and he had got it. That's my point. I told you just now that he had asked his mother again and she had promised him the money."

"For this scheme?"

"Oh yes, she was told about that. Though I don't suppose she troubled overmuch about what Charles wanted the money for. She refused before because she wanted to hang on to her own possessions. But she had learnt recently from the doctor that she wasn't going to be able to hang on to anything much longer. So naturally she let him have what he wanted."

"I see," Cheviot said. "How do you know she felt like that?"

"Oh. Well, I don't, exactly. I'm only guessing."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"And are you also guessing when you say she promised the money?"

"No, of course not. That's a fact."

"How do you know?"

"Charles told me, of course."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Then there is no confirmation of it?"

Bryan stared at him. "What a frightfully suspicious chap you are!" he exclaimed. "Apart from the fact that Charles is absolutely straight, what on earth would he gain by telling me a lie about it? There would have been no point in his saying the money was promised if he couldn't produce it when it was wanted. That stands to reason, doesn't it?"

"I daresay it does," said Cheviot, "put like that. But there would have been plenty of point in his telling you he'd have the money, if his mother had refused—and he meant to get it in spite of that."

"Oh!" cried Bryan. "You don't wrap things up at all, do you?"

Cheviot shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps Mr. Vance will be able to explain," he said. "Where can I find him?"

Bryan got to his feet. "If you really mean to tell him all this—though it's practically an accusation, and a frightfully foul one at that—I suppose I'd better send him to you."

"Nice of you," said Cheviot. "But I'll get Sergeant Ross to go along with you."

CHAPTER FOUR

CHARLES VANCE did not sing or hum, as Bryan had done, as he followed me along the corridor. But directly the door of the common-room was shut behind him he gave tongue:

"This is a hell of a position!" he cried. "I'm afraid I lost control of myself a bit at the end of lunch, and I suppose I upset everybody, which isn't likely to do a lot of good. But I've been bottling it all up for days, holding myself in all the time; and then when young Church declared that everyone could tell the truth, it just got too much for me and I told them—I told them what I've been on the point of telling them for nearly a week."

He moved away from the door and sat down heavily in an armchair.

"Can you imagine what it is like for me," he demanded, "having to live with these people, work with them, take my meals with them—knowing all the time that one of them has killed my mother? That silly little fool, Blossie, talks about her nerves—my God! she should try a bit of the strain I'm living under!"

"And it isn't only in the day-time. The nights are worse still. In the day there is at least something to do, something to look at. But at night, lying awake as I do for hours on end, there's nothing to do but think, think, think.

"I loved my mother, Inspector. Some people say

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

there is never much real sympathy between a mother and her children if she's over forty when they are born. That's rot. My mother was just forty and I was the only one she had. She was always very sweet to me. She'd do anything I asked her, short of actually spoiling me, and sometimes she did that. And I—well, I've always done the little I could for her, to make her happy. She lived with me when we were in London, ever since my father died. And when I came here, I persuaded Salaman to let me bring her along—thinking I was saving her life. And you see what I brought her to—that ghastly death.

“And now here I am, living beside the brute that killed her. I don't care whether it is man or woman—brute is the word.”

He jumped up suddenly, took a pace forward, then turned back and sat down again.

“I thought I knew all these people—all except young Nevil, and I don't suppose he did it—why should he, he hadn't known her six months? But I suppose I can't rule him out. The fact that the others knew her is a reason why they can't have killed her. She wasn't a person anyone *could* kill. She was so sweet, so gentle——

“Anyway, somebody did kill her. So somebody hated her; hated her enough to give her poison. And you heard them all at lunch to-day, saying how they adored her! I listened to that. I wanted to see if anyone wouldn't say it. I didn't see how anyone who had killed her could be such a damned hypocrite. But they all said it. Didn't they? And all that teasing and laughing and silly arguing at lunch, as if it was a holiday and everybody was jolly. But there's one of them who is only acting.”

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

He was clenching his fists till the knuckles showed white.

"I go and talk to someone about the work," he cried, "and then I think 'My God, it may be you!' At first I tried sitting here after dinner, just as I've done practically every evening for five years. And somebody passed me a cup of coffee—it was Joan Salaman, as a matter of fact—and as I took it and looked down at her hand, I thought that it might have been that hand which poured poison into my mother's medicine. I couldn't stick this room after that. I can't help meeting the people at work and I've got to have meals with them; but for the evenings I go out, even if it rains, and walk about in the fields. But even that doesn't stop these thoughts. It's unbearable, awful, I don't know what to do."

Cheviot said, "I don't think you had better work yourself up about it like this, Mr. Vance. That won't help us to find the murderer. Suppose, for a change, you tell me something about your job here and what you are going to do in the future. Having the position you hold, it must have been rather a shock to you when you found you weren't picked to succeed Mr. Salaman. Wasn't it?"

He had to repeat the question twice before Charles grasped it. He appeared to be in a daze.

"Oh, that?" he said at last. "No, it wasn't a shock. I didn't mind. I'm getting past the age of ambition. I've never been very ambitious, anyway. I want compatible surroundings and work that interests me, much more than authority, or a lot of money, or any of those things. I can work very happily under Bryan Malcolm's leadership."

"As you've worked happily with Mr. Salaman?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"On the whole, yes."

"Why only 'on the whole,' Mr. Vance?"

"Salaman and I haven't always agreed on the way the Unit should be run," Charles explained. "Bryan should be able to run it much better."

"But won't Mr. Salaman retain his controlling interest and thus settle the Unit's policy?"

"He may not—not indefinitely," Charles answered.

"You mean," persisted Cheviot, "that you will invest your £8,000 in the Unit and then you and Mr. Malcolm will get control?"

"It may work out that way," said Charles.

"Then it is lucky for you that you have come into the money."

"I'm not as materialistic as all that," Charles retorted. "I'd give every penny of the money not to have had my mother murdered. She wouldn't have lived long, but I would have liked her to have finished her life in a natural way and have passed in her sleep. And anyhow her death made no difference as far as the money was concerned. She had promised to give it to me when I wanted it. Didn't Bryan tell you about that?"

"Yes, he did," Cheviot agreed. "And I gathered from him that getting the money meant a great deal to you."

"No," said Charles. "Oh no. Bryan is wrong there. Or more probably you misunderstood him, because he quite grasps the position. I didn't really care. I wouldn't have been unduly worried if my mother had said 'No.'"

There seemed to be a faint emphasis on the personal pronoun. Cheviot spotted it too, for he said, "Do you mean that though you didn't care very much it did mean a lot to—somebody else?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Perhaps. I don't know. I don't think this concerns your case at all."

"Come, Mr. Vance," said Cheviot. "It is very dangerous to conceal things from me, even if they appear unimportant. And I'm not sure that this is unimportant. Mr. Malcolm has told me all about the scheme you and he concocted for getting Mr. Salaman out of the Unit. Weren't you enthusiastic about it?"

"I wasn't as keen as Bryan was," Charles answered. "It was his idea from the start. Mind you, I've always known that if the Unit was to go on, Salaman would have to leave it, and I suppose that means buying him out. And if I am to do part of the buying, I must have my money—I mean the money my mother was leaving me."

"This scheme hardly amounted to 'buying Salaman out,' " said Cheviot.

"I thought that was the essential part of it. Bryan said he could get Salaman into the sort of mood in which he'd be willing to sell. I left that to him. In fact I left the whole thing to him, except for talking to my mother, which was obviously my job."

"Then," Cheviot insisted, "the reply to my question—the one you didn't want to answer—is that the person to whom the getting of the £8,000 mattered much more than it did to you was Bryan Malcolm?"

"Well, yes, if you insist. I think it did."

"He showed his anxiety about it?"

"Yes. He was all of a jump, as a matter of fact. You see, I had told him that I would speak to my mother as soon as I found the right opportunity. But things didn't fit in very well at first: after all, she had already refused twice so I had to feel my way.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

So I didn't manage to put the question till after tea on the day she died. That was two or three days after I had promised Bryan. And all that time he kept bothering me, wanting to know whether I had asked her. At least, not all the time: he left me alone on the last day. It was rather odd. I felt he was deliberately trying to keep out of my way."

"Then," said Cheviot, "he must have seemed considerably relieved after tea, when you told him what your mother had said."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't tell him then. He was keeping away from me and—well, Bryan is an awfully good fellow but he has his moods, and if you see him mooching around like a bear with a sore head it is best to keep out of his way. His wife gets on his nerves, you know: they quarrel night after night in their bedroom, keeping my mother and me awake—they did keep us awake, I mean. Anyway, he looked pretty sick that afternoon, so I kept quiet. And then there was my mother's death, which of course put the business right out of my head. So I didn't tell him till the following day. And it didn't make much difference, then."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Then, for a couple of days before your mother's death, Mr. Malcolm was in an unduly excited state about this money, which meant a lot to him. On the last day he seemed preoccupied and morose, and he stopped asking you what had happened and you didn't tell him, so that for all he knew either she still hadn't been asked, or else she had been asked and had refused?"

"Ye—es," said Charles. "I suppose he might have taken it that way."

"And," Cheviot went on, "the point at which he

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

changed from badgering you with questions to becoming preoccupied and silent was just about the time when the smell of almonds was added to your mother's medicine!"

"Oh, good God!" cried Charles.

There was a nasty look in Cheviot's eye. "Tell me, Mr. Vance," he said. "Hadn't all this already occurred to you? Hadn't you considered that Mr. Malcolm might have murdered your mother?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Charles said, "Yes, I had. I didn't believe it, I don't believe it. But I thought of it. That is what has been keeping me awake at nights. He had got a reason, he was so dreadfully keen on my getting that money, and I suppose he did think I had not done anything about getting it. Or at any rate he may have thought that. And on that last day he was so strange. I've told myself again and again that it was only because he had quarrelled again with his wife—only I can't be certain of that. And it is all too horrible. He was my best friend. It has nearly driven me mad, worrying over it, lying awake at nights, seeing how Bryan could have done it and trying to convince myself that he didn't. It doesn't seem possible that he did, and yet sometimes I believe it. My God, these last few days have been hell, simply hell for me!"

CHAPTER FIVE

I EXPECTED Cheviot to open up a bit after Charles Vance left the room. There is nothing he likes better than thinking aloud before a well-drilled audience, and although he had told me to keep my mouth shut it wasn't likely that he would want to apply the same restriction on himself. So I waited for some nice cynical reflections: probably a commentary on Charles's skill as an actor in an emotional part.

But Cheviot also has his cryptic moods, and this apparently was one of them. So all he said was, "I'd better go on now to Nevil Church. I don't know what I want from him, but I may as well get all the men finished before starting on the women. I must say, though, that I hope the rest won't be so completely foul as these first three."

Perhaps that was commentary enough. To unprejudiced eyes and ears like mine, Salaman and Bryan Malcolm had certainly been "foul" but Charles Vance was sincere and tragic.

I went off and hunted for Nevil Church, running into him at last at the end of a passage. There was no doubt about it; he was a nice boy. He even had a properly deferential regard for detective-sergeants.

He followed me into the common-room and sat down, carefully pulling up the knees of his trousers.

"I really don't know what I can tell you that's of any use," he announced, "but if you'll give me a lead with a few questions, of course I'll help you all I

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

can. Oh, and by the way—I nearly forgot this—Sala-man wants to know if he can put you up for the night. I suppose he means both of you, though he didn't actually mention the sergeant. I'm to put it to you that it might be more convenient than going down to the Avonbridge Arms."

"Thanks," said Cheviot, "I accept with pleasure. So does Sergeant Ross, even if uninvited. I suppose this means that we can be with you all at dinner to-night. I hope we shan't have another embarrassing scene like that one at lunch. Does Charles Vance often break out like that?"

"No. I've never known him like that before. He's usually pretty mild, even if a bit uncertain."

Cheviot asked what he meant by "uncertain."

"Well, you never quite know what you are going to get from him. More often than not he is awfully amiable and decent, but every now and again he's a perfect beast. I think he has got a kink, if you know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't," said Cheviot. "What kind of kink?"

"I oughtn't to have said that, really. It's not for me to judge. And as I said he is awfully decent as a rule."

It seemed to me that Cheviot ought to have fastened onto the kink and worried at it till it was straightened out. There wasn't much sense in letting Nevil start ideas like that and then back out of finishing them. But it didn't seem to worry Cheviot. He said, "When you say that Vance hasn't broken out like that before, do you mean that he hasn't been emotional about his mother's death?"

"Not in that way. He has only been silent. Sort

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

of brooding. At meals it has been ghastly: he would have given us all the willies, only Bryan insisted on keeping things going in the old way, with arguments and so on."

"Then," Cheviot persisted, "if I told you that Charles has exhibited himself to me to-day as a highly strung, extremely emotional man, almost on the verge of hysteria, you'd say that wasn't his ordinary character?"

"Good Lord, yes. I mean, no. I mean that wouldn't be like him at all. On the other hand I wouldn't be altogether surprised. He's such a funny chap. He hasn't really got an 'ordinary character.' You think you know him quite well and then he shows you something different, a bit of himself I mean which doesn't fit with the rest. That's what I meant just now."

"Is he sincere? Or would he pretend things for the sake of the effect?"

"He might. I don't really know. He's so odd sometimes."

"I see," said Cheviot. (By the bye, saying "I see" is one of Cheviot's mannerisms: it usually means "Now I've established the point I wanted to establish" or, at more critical moments, "Got you!")

He cogitated for a few moments with his eyes shut. Then, keeping his right eye closed, he opened his left and looked calculatingly at Nevil.

"You said a minute ago that Bryan's passion for arguments prevented things getting on your nerves when Charles was having his silences. The argument at lunch didn't seem to be having quite that effect on you!"

"No," said Nevil frankly. "I got riled then. Bryan

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

is a different chap from Charles: he is *never* sincere. He says things deliberately to annoy people. He starts perfectly absurd subjects for argument just to infuriate Mrs. Rack, because that amuses him. Mrs. Rack is a good sort, by the way, but she is easy meat for Bryan because she has a quick temper and she's a born fighter: the bull waiting for his red flag, if you know what I mean. He goes for me, too. When I first came here, I hated him. But Joan showed me that it was all part of his pose—Mrs. Vance was very decent to me, too—and now I don't trouble about him except when he's beastly to her—Joan, I mean."

"That sounds, Mr. Church," said Cheviot, "as if you haven't always been very happy here. You've had trouble with Charles Vance and some with Bryan Malcolm. On the other hand, Joan and Mrs. Vance have both helped you. What sort of help did you get from Mrs. Vance?"

"Oh. Well, she saw that Bryan was getting me under, and she sort of mothered me, if you know what I mean. After that, whenever I had a trouble on I took it to her. She was rather wonderful. She was frightfully old, nearly ninety I think, and she always seemed three parts asleep when she sat here: but when you talked to her she was quite extraordinarily intelligent. And awfully kind. I wasn't the only one who took things to her, troubles, I mean. Pretty nearly everyone did. Not Mrs. Rack, I suppose, because she's too self-possessed, but the others. At least, Joan was very fond of her and so was Blossie: they both used to have private harangues with her. And even Bryan—of course he isn't the sort of chap to have troubles and want help, but I know he used to go and have heart-to-heart talks with her, and she

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

told him off and said he'd disappointed her, she wouldn't have believed it of him, and——"

Cheviot was on to that like a knife. He said sharply, "One minute, Mr. Church. Are you talking now in generalities, or are you referring to a particular incident?"

Nevil said, "What? Oh, I see. Well, as a matter of fact I was thinking of one particular occasion, I suppose. Though I don't think it was the only one, in fact it can't have been. That's what I meant. There wasn't anything in what they said, but it all implied that she knew him much better than she would have done if they'd only—— Well, I'm getting in rather a muddle, but you know what I mean. Anyhow, it doesn't matter, does it?"

"I don't suppose so," said Cheviot. "When was this?"

"The other day. Oh, of course: as a matter of fact it was before lunch on the day she died."

"In that case," said Cheviot, "you had better tell me exactly what happened."

"Oh. All right. Only it can't have anything to do with her being killed, you know. As a matter of fact, I wanted to talk to her about something that was troubling me. You see, I'd got into the habit of bringing things to her, as I told you. So as I happened to be coming down the passage I popped in here. As soon as I opened the door, I saw that she was talking to Bryan and I heard her say, 'But I know you so well, I can't believe you would do such a thing.'"

"And then?"

"I didn't hear any more. I'd barely got my head round the door when I heard that, and of course I got out quick. It wasn't any business of mine."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Did Mrs. Vance sound angry?"

"Good Lord, no. She was never angry with anyone."

"And you didn't hear even part of Bryan's answer? A pity. It is always unsatisfactory to hear only one side of a quarrel."

"But they weren't quarrelling," Nevil insisted. "I'm sure they weren't. As a matter of fact, my idea was—mind you, I don't know of course, and it may not have been anything of the sort—but my idea was that Bryan had been talking to her about his wife."

"Oh," said Cheviot. "Really? There hardly seems a direct connection."

Nevil smiled. "Not to you, I suppose. And as a matter of fact I don't know that I ought to mention it, only everyone knows it here and I suppose someone else will let it out if I don't. You see, Bryan and Mother M. are just frightfully cat and dog. If you know what I mean. They fight like anything."

"His fault or hers?"

"Oh, I don't like her. Too schoolmarmy. But if he's always arguing with her, like he is with everyone else, and showing off—— Well, you can see how it would go, can't you?"

"More or less," said Cheviot. "Well, thanks very much, Mr. Church. Would you mind asking Mrs. Malcolm to come and see me?"

"Oh. Right oh. Only don't you tell her I said——"

CHAPTER SIX

FOR some time after Nevil left us nothing happened. Cheviot sat with his eyes shut, while I speculated on whether or not he would allow himself to be deflected off Charles Vance and on to Bryan Malcolm. Personally, of the people we had seen so far, I would have put most of my money on Salaman, with a small "covering" bet on Bryan. There wasn't anything against Charles, who was behaving as any decent fellow would in his circumstances; nor, of course, was there anything against Nevil Church. But Salaman was the nastiest sort of hypocrite and just the kind of man who would give cyanide to old ladies, watching them die with oily approval.

I was working all this out when Mrs. Malcolm came at last, pushing a trolley laden with tea-things.

"This is quite the most inconvenient time of the day for me," she exclaimed. "And in any case, it is tea-time now."

She went out into the passage and sounded a gong. A few minutes later the whole staff of the Unit trooped in and stood about in groups, talking office "shop" in an unhungry manner till Mrs. Malcolm had filled all the cups and balanced a slice of cake in each saucer. Then, the instant she stepped back, everyone swooped on the food and departed to distant corners of the room, like dogs taking bones to kennels. Salaman alone remained in the middle of the carpet, looking benignly around before putting

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

his own cup to his lips. He said, "Ah. Most refreshing indeed." Then he noticed Cheviot and me. "Of course," he said, "you must join us at our tea, we all need it so badly in the middle of our afternoon's work. Have you an extra cup, Mrs. Malcolm, two extra cups? And two slices of this very excellent cake? Splendid. I'm sure the Inspector and Sergeant—er—er—have been working as hard as any of us."

He turned suddenly to face us. "And how are you getting on? Or is that a question one doesn't ask of the police? You see I have had no experience except of course with Superintendent Lanfier; I wouldn't have asked him, but then he was so very official, if official is the word. Doubtless a very admirable officer, but I never felt a great deal of confidence in him. Whereas I am quite sure that you——"

"I don't see how the police start on a poison case," said Bryan. "It's no use crawling about the carpet looking for spilt cyanide."

"My dear Bryan," cried Mrs. Rackstraw, "that sort of thing went out of date with Sherlock Holmes. Nowadays, the police approach crime from the psychological angle. They start by finding the motive——"

"An impossible thing in this instance," said Salaman. "No one can possibly have had a motive for killing Mrs. Vance."

"Oh, quite so," said Bryan. "That's clear enough to us, but the question is whether it will be equally clear to the police. They've got a jaundiced outlook, bound to have, and they'll be likely to fasten on to something and call it a motive when it isn't really one at all. That is to say, there must be things like inheritances and personal dislike and so on which will be on their list as 'motives for murder,' but which

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

just wouldn't apply with particular people in a particular case."

"There is no sense," said Mrs. Rackstraw, "in assuming that Scotland Yard officials are utter fools. Motive, as I was saying, is the first thing they will look for. But it must be supported by certain psychological factors. Several people might have possible motives, but it is not likely that more than one will be temperamentally homicidal."

"If by that piece of polysyllability," said Bryan, "you merely mean feeling murderous towards people we don't like, it is the commonest of all emotions."

"Nobody," said Nevil, "would commit a murder just because he didn't like somebody."

"Perhaps not in the beautiful world of your innocence, Nevil," retorted Bryan, "but in the sordid sphere of crime it is the most usual of all motives. It is all a matter of degree, from snapping somebody's head off in an argument to digging a knife into their ribs or giving them poison. My point is that we are all of us, by the nature of things, what Mrs. Rack calls 'temperamentally homicidal.' I am. You are, Nevil. So is Mrs. Rack. Take her as an example. We all know how she used to get worked up and bite at Mrs. Vance: well, that was harmless enough, of course, but——"

Mrs. Rackstraw came quickly from the window and stood threateningly in front of Bryan. "You know perfectly well I didn't 'bite' at her," she cried. "I merely protested gently and tried to persuade her to be logical."

"All right, Mrs. Rack," cried Bryan. "Don't get excited. I said it was quite harmless, didn't I? What I am getting at is that that is what you do when you

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

feel sore at anyone. Somebody else, feeling what you feel, would be much more violent. Whatever degree the feeling goes to, it is something we all feel from time to time: I call it 'feeling murderous' and you, because you like long words, call it 'being temperamentally homicidal.' But whatever we call it it is just one of the commonest aspects of human nature."

Charles Vance said suddenly, "Are you trying to suggest, Bryan, that my mother was killed merely because someone felt momentarily 'sore' at something she said or did? Because I never heard anything more utterly absurd. Murder isn't done for reasons like that——"

"Just what I said," Nevil put in.

"It is done," Charles went on, fiercely, "by brutes who only think about their own sordid desires."

"Not always, Charles," Bryan retorted. "Some murders aren't done for the murderer's own sake at all. What about the murder of blackmailers? That is usually regarded as a good social act."

Charles said, "Are you suggesting now that my mother was a blackmailer? I never heard anything more ridiculous."

"Of course not," said Bryan. "Don't be such an ass, Charles. I wasn't speaking of your mother at all."

"It is my mother we are all thinking about," cried Charles. "God knows what you want to talk of her like this for. Either you are deliberately trying to suggest to the Inspector that she blackmailed people, or you think that Mrs. Rack killed her because they didn't always agree in common-room conversation—or else you are just airing your silly views on things in general. In any case I wish you'd keep your mouth shut."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Salaman had described his staff and himself as "a family." This sample of the family spirit produced an alarming sound caused by six people drawing in their breath more or less at the same moment and letting it out in a gasp. Then Salaman said quickly, "Oh, my dear chap! Of course things have been very trying for you and I quite understand that you feel upset, but you mustn't talk to Bryan like that. Really you mustn't. We must have unity. Unity in the Unit, that's absolutely essential."

"Sorry," murmured Charles, without looking at Bryan.

"I think we had better finish our tea and go back to our work," said Salaman.

They all trooped out of the room except Mrs. Rackstraw and Mrs. Malcolm. Mrs. Rackstraw fidgeted with books on the window-sill and Mrs. Malcolm collected cups and saucers. After a minute, Mrs. Rackstraw gave up hope of being left alone with us and said, "Inspector, may I speak to you for a moment?" Then, when we had gathered round her, as far from Mrs. Malcolm as the size of the room permitted, she went on, "I hope you understand that Bryan Malcolm is rather an irresponsible person. The chief thing he delights in is making other people feel uncomfortable. He doesn't really mean very much by it, he is merely playing a sort of game. Normally, it isn't as cruel as it sounds, because we all know that it is only his way of amusing himself and so we don't pay much attention to it. But to a stranger—yourself, for instance—it might give quite a wrong impression. So I thought I ought to warn you."

"That's very kind of you," Cheviot answered. "It

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

is always useful to me to get sidelights on people's characters."

She didn't look very well satisfied with that. "He is never very particular about whether he is telling the truth or not," she continued, "so long as he can score debating points. You've got to realize that, if you are not going to be completely misled. He isn't deceiving himself: he tells lies deliberately if they serve his purpose."

Cheviot said, "Take a note of that, Sergeant Ross, against Bryan Malcolm." He seemed to enjoy pretending to be obtuse and I wasn't surprised when Mrs. Rackstraw showed her annoyance.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," she cried. "That absurd remark just now about me. It wasn't true and he knew perfectly well it wasn't. You can ask any of the others. I didn't bite at Mrs. Vance, I merely felt forced now and then to insist that things she said were beside the point. Having had a training in logic, I hate hearing people repeat a definite assertion a hundred times when they haven't troubled to think about it once. But that was all. In those little ways I sometimes found Mrs. Vance rather tiresome, but I didn't dislike her. On the contrary, I admired her very much."

"Those little ways," Cheviot repeated. "Then there were other habits of hers which annoyed you besides her—er, thoughtless repetition."

"She was very old," Mrs. Rackstraw explained, "and really it would have been better if she hadn't sat here when we were all talking in the evening. She had a most irritating habit of speaking about quite a different subject from the one everyone else was discussing. Quite often it would be something

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

which she had heard two or three weeks before. She brooded over things. Of course, no one could blame her for that, because at her age she had very little to do, she didn't read and she didn't knit and she just sat and dreamed—you can hardly call it thinking. But, you see, it would be very miserable for us, being cooped up together in this miserable hole, if we couldn't engage in serious discussion of things that matter, and so we used to do that nearly every evening. It was very disconcerting when Mrs. Vance chattered about something quite different—really most irritating. I remember once we were discussing the higher patriotism and I instanced Nurse Cavell: and Mrs. Vance shook us all by suddenly saying quite loudly, 'I don't believe she did it, I'm sure she was wrongly accused.' It wasn't till about five minutes later that we discovered that Mrs. Vance was not talking about Nurse Cavell at all, but about some char that Mr. Salaman had sacked three weeks before for stealing the petty cash!"

While I tried to hide a smile, Cheviot said, "Very upsetting. And I gather that on that occasion you were rather furious with her?"

"For the moment, I think I was. At any rate, I remember that I spoke rather sharply, which I imagine is what Bryan would call 'biting' her. But it was not more than momentary irritability and it is perfectly ridiculous of him to suggest to you——"

"Inspector," said Mrs. Malcolm, "I don't know whether you expect me to wait here indefinitely."

"Oh, good Lord!" cried Cheviot. "I'm frightfully sorry. Well, thanks very much, Mrs. Rackstraw, that was very helpful."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

He waited till she had left the room.

"Now, Mrs. Malcolm, you must let us atone for that inexcusable rudeness by helping with the washing-up of all those tea-things. Sergeant Ross is an absolute adept at that kind of job. His wife trusts him with the best china. So if you'll let him get to work while I ask you a few questions——"

Fortunately, Mrs. Malcolm said "Certainly not," and shut her thin, determined lips with a snap.

"Then I must try not to keep you long," said Cheviot. "I expect you feel a bit shattered after that unpleasant scene with Mr. Vance just now. But I must say your husband filled me with admiration: he really showed great restraint. If he had answered back in kind, as he must have felt tempted to do, there might have been a fracas. Mr. Vance is frightfully on edge, which is natural enough after the last few days. And of course your husband must have been on edge too for some weeks. All the more credit to him, then——"

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "Why should my husband be on edge?"

"While Mr. Salaman was choosing his successor," Cheviot explained. "It is always very trying for the competitors while a thing like that is going on. Did you feel confident that your husband would get the post?"

"It would have been most unjust if he hadn't. He is a far cleverer man than Mr. Vance."

"Cleverness isn't always recognized," said Cheviot. "But I daresay you were able to help your husband's claim."

"Only by restraining him from making a fool of himself," she answered tartly. "Do you know that he

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

actually went to Mr. Salaman and advised him to appoint Mr. Vance? I never heard such madness."

"He was probably being subtle," Cheviot suggested. "Hadm't he all along had an understanding with Mr. Vance? If so, it would hardly matter who got the title of managing director——"

"It would matter a great deal to me," she retorted. "Do you imagine I want to go on being housekeeper, merely an unpaid skivvy?"

"Ah, I had overlooked that point, certainly," said Cheviot. "Why do you do this work, Mrs. Malcolm?"

"To make sure of being with my husband," she answered. "We were separated for three years and I didn't like that at all. Then Mr. Salaman invited me here, but I soon found out that if the staff was increased, as Bryant expected it to be, there would be a suggestion that I should go back to town so that Bryan could use a small bedroom and our flat could be given to two other people. So when Mr. Salaman suggested I should look after things, I took on the work of housekeeper so as to have an established position here."

She suddenly got up. "But I don't see," she said, "that this kind of question is going to help you in finding out about Mrs. Vance. So if you've nothing more important to ask me——"

"Oh, but I have," said Cheviot, smiling at her. He is reputed to have a magic smile which always gets what he wants out of women. Sounds a bit dangerous to me. Anyway, I had only seen him use it once before and then it failed to have any effect. It also failed on Mrs. Malcolm.

"Then perhaps you'll be quick," she said. "I've plenty to do."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Certainly," said Cheviot. "Did you like Mrs. Vance?"

"I said so at lunch."

"And your husband appears to have been particularly fond of her?"

"She was good to him while we were separated. Naturally he needed advice sometimes, and I wasn't here to give it, so he went to her."

"But that was three years ago. How about lately?"

"He has been on very good terms with her. But naturally going to her for advice ended when I came here."

"Are you sure of that?" Cheviot demanded. "He may have relied—and no doubt he did—mainly on your advice, but didn't he sometimes consult Mrs. Vance as well?"

"Certainly not. I should not have permitted anything of the sort."

I suppose Cheviot meant his smile to be ingratiating, but Mrs. Malcolm didn't take it like that. When he said, "You know, husbands are rather like little boys: they sometimes do what they aren't 'permitted' to do," she flared up at once. "There is nothing funny about that remark," she cried. "I suppose you are suggesting that my husband has been going to Mrs. Vance behind my back. I resent that idea very strongly. I know it is quite untrue."

"I'm sorry," said Cheviot. "At the same time I have evidence that he consulted her about something on the day she died."

"I don't believe it," cried Mrs. Malcolm.

"And," he went on, "instead of helping him she reprimanded him severely."

"I don't believe it," she repeated. She looked very

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

black. "What did he go to her about—I mean, what do you suggest he went to her about?"

"I don't know yet," answered Cheviot. "I am going to ask him."

He got up, but Mrs. Malcolm refused to take the hint. "Then I shall stay and hear what he says," she declared.

"Oh, very well," said Cheviot. "Perhaps that will be quite a good plan. You might tell Sergeant Ross where to find him."

"I will take you to him," she answered.

So it seemed that Cheviot was yielding to the pressure of clues, giving up his Lanfier-inspired prejudice against Charles Vance, and going hot-foot after Bryan Malcolm. Personally I should have thought him an obstinate fool, after what we had heard, if he had done anything else.

We turned to the right outside the dining-room door and went along another passage past doors bearing the names of Miss Salaman and Miss Bloss. A third door was labelled "Mr. Bryan Malcolm." Mrs. Malcolm marched in and we followed. The room was a small one, furnished as an office, with a large, well-filled bookcase covering the whole of one wall, the other three being hung with specimens of Albion photography. Bryan looked up from the desk in surprise.

"Hullo, Marian. What do you—— Oh, it's you, Inspector. What's the idea? Have you enrolled my wife as a guide round the building?"

"The inspector has just told me," Mrs. Malcolm began, but Cheviot hurriedly stopped her.

"I think I had better question him myself," he said. "Mr. Malcolm, I want to hear about your last interview with Mrs. Vance."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Bryan got to his feet. "If we are all going to have a talk," he said, "you had better sit down. Are you staying, Marian? Then I'll get two more chairs."

Cheviot said it wasn't necessary and that "we" (which apparently included, unjustifiably, myself) preferred standing. But Bryan would not be stopped. "No, no, much more cosy, sitting," he cried. "I shan't be a minute. I'll borrow Blossie's chairs."

After he had gone, Mrs. Malcolm sat down and as that brought her face into a good light I had a careful look at it. It wasn't of the kind that men fought and died for. As far as features went, it was not altogether too bad—I mean the nose was unquestionably a nose, and the lips, if thin and pursed and certainly unmissable, were all right as shutters to a mouth, which I suppose is the purpose for which Nature originally designed them. But what was wrong was the expression: or lack of it. Mrs. Malcolm's face in repose, as I was apparently seeing it then, was a totally negative object; and I had just seen that when she was roused to husband-hunting it became extremely unattractive. In fact, of all the people in the house, Mrs. Malcolm stood out as having the face of a poisoner, and if Bryan had been the corpse I should not have had any doubt as to who ought to hang. But there didn't seem to be any reason why she should have killed Mrs. Vance.

I began to realize that Bryan was taking an unduly long time over collecting chairs from the next room, and I wondered what was detaining him. When he returned at last—though I daresay he was only away two or three minutes—he only brought one chair.

"Sorry to be so long," he apologized. "Miss Bloss

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

wasn't in her room, so I stopped to leave a note on her blotting-pad to tell her where this had got to. And I'm sorry, I was only able to get one, so the sergeant will have to stand after all. Now then, what's your trouble, Inspector? You were asking about my last interview with Mrs. Vance. Well, I'm not sure what you mean by that. Of course, I was in the common-room, along with everyone else, after dinner when she took the medicine and died. And before that I was at dinner with her."

"Your last interview alone with her," Cheviot explained.

"Oh. Well, I think that was shortly before lunch. In the common-room. She always sat there, you know, when it wasn't fine and warm enough for her to be in the garden. I just slipped into the room to look for my fountain-pen, which I had foolishly put down somewhere—you know how you do—and as she was alone there, of course we chatted for a minute or two."

"What about?" Cheviot demanded, while a nasty look began to appear on the expressionlessness of Mrs. Malcolm's face.

"Oh, nothing very important," said Bryan. "I forget exactly what I said."

"And do you also forget what she said?"

"I'm afraid I do," he answered. "It isn't important, is it?"

"I think it may be very important," said Cheviot.

"Oh," said Bryan. "Then I must try to remember. But rather a lot has happened since then. If you could give me an inkling, just to remind me, since you seem to know something about it——"

"I understand," said Cheviot, "that Mrs. Vance

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

said she didn't believe you would do something or other, as it wasn't like you at all."

"Oh, that?" said Bryan. "I didn't know you meant that. Yes, that's pretty much what she said."

"Well, go on," said Cheviot. "Tell me about this conversation. It's time your memory woke up, Mr. Malcolm."

Mrs. Malcolm said severely, "You never said a word about this to me, Bryan."

Bryan laughed, uncomfortably. "Well, I couldn't, could I? Obviously, after Mrs. Vance had died in that way, being poisoned I mean, I couldn't say a word to anyone: in the circumstances I couldn't let it get about that I was probably the last person to be alone with her. It was much better to keep the thing to myself. That's why I had to hedge just now, in order to find out how much the Inspector knew, before I admitted anything. But now I know where I stand. I suppose young Nevil overheard that much and reported it. I was afraid he would, only there was always the chance that he hadn't heard anything, or wouldn't speak about it, so I thought the best thing I could do was to keep my mouth shut till something happened to show that Nevil had talked."

"And why were those precautions so necessary, Mr. Malcolm? The fact that you were alone with Mrs. Vance during the morning of the day she died doesn't sound particularly incriminating. Or do you mean that while you were talking to her you put poison in her medicine?"

"Of course I didn't," said Bryan. "Don't be absurd. My point is that if I had been able to keep quiet about this, and Nevil had kept quiet too, there wouldn't have been any harm done to anybody: not

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

even to your case, Inspector, because this doesn't affect it. But as I can't keep quiet about it, I've got to tell the whole story, what Mrs. Vance and I talked about and all that. And the trouble is that it's a thing you could easily misunderstand."

"I'll try not to," said Cheviot dryly.

"And I hope you'll succeed," returned Bryan, "because it might matter a lot to me. You see, it's like this. I've told you about the scheme Charles and I had for getting control of the Unit. It all depended on Mrs. Vance promising Charles the money and I admit that I was pretty keen on it. Once Charles had promised to speak to his mother, I was all on tenterhooks to know the result. I wanted Charles to go in at once, but he said he had to wait till she was in the right mood. I thought that rather absurd—between a son and his mother, I mean—but he didn't agree and he kept putting the thing off. I tried chivying him along, but he wouldn't budge, and at last I felt convinced that he was going to let me down. I thought that for some silly reason or other he was afraid to tackle his mother and that he had only been leading me along when he promised to speak to her. So finally I decided to go to her myself."

Mrs. Malcolm exclaimed, "What a ridiculous thing to do! And I really cannot understand why you should have taken an important step like that without consulting me. I thought we had put a stop to that kind of thing a long time ago."

"Hang it all," cried Bryan, "how could I put it to you, Marian? You were in London. It certainly wasn't the kind of thing I'd want to put on paper."

"I don't see the least reason why you shouldn't

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

have mentioned it in a letter," she retorted. "It would have given you something besides the weather to write to me about! And in any case you could have mentioned it after I got back. You said you didn't speak to Mrs. Vance till just before lunch. I got back at twelve, and we were together in the bedroom till half-past. When did you go to Mrs. Vance?"

"Oh, just after that. I suppose it was about twenty to one."

"Then you must have gone straight from me to her. In fact, I remember you said you had some business to see to, and I thought you were going to your room to finish something. That was just one of your usual lies, I suppose?"

"It *was* business," said Bryan.

"It certainly wasn't what you wanted me to believe it was. You deliberately avoided telling me the truth."

"I didn't," Bryan answered. "It wasn't that at all. Only I couldn't tell you just then. You know quite well why I couldn't, Marian."

"Why couldn't you?" Cheviot demanded.

"It wasn't—a suitable time."

That made Cheviot heavily sarcastic. "Oh, so you also like to choose suitable moments for important conversations, Mr. Malcolm? Just, in fact, what you were objecting to Mr. Vance doing!"

"Oh hell!" cried Bryan. "What has this got to do with it all, anyway? I'm sorry, Marian. I suppose he has got to know."

"It is your own fault," she retorted, "for being so foolish."

"I like that," said Bryan. "Anyway, if you must know, Inspector, I couldn't tell my wife what I was

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

going to do, because she and I—weren't on very good terms just then."

"Oh, really?" said Cheviot. "You mean that your wife had been away for a holiday and within half an hour of her return you had a quarrel?"

"What the hell has it got to do with you if we had?" cried Bryan. "Haven't you ever heard of married couples quarrelling, before now?"

"It does sometimes happen, I know," said Cheviot smoothly. "Would you mind telling me what the quarrel was about?"

"I should mind like hell," said Bryan. "In fact I won't, and that's flat. It's certainly none of your damned business."

Cheviot surprised me by taking this refusal quite easily.

"Just as you like," he said. "Then go on with your story, Mr. Malcolm. Without consulting your wife, with whom you were temporarily on bad terms, you went to have this talk with Mrs. Vance. You wanted to make sure that Charles got her money before her death if she didn't die soon enough to suit his plans. H'm. Not an easy thing to put. How did you do it?"

"I just told her the whole thing," Bryan explained. "I expected her to look at it sensibly and see how much it would be to her son's advantage if she did what was wanted. But she wouldn't—wouldn't look at it that way, I mean. I suppose her age got in the way and the fact that she belonged to a generation which didn't know anything about modern business methods. I couldn't really get her to understand our perfectly simple scheme. She seemed to think it was crooked—which is absurd, of course. Anyhow, she went all moral, said we were trying to swindle Sala-

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

man, and declared that she would never have believed that Charles and I would have done such a thing. That was when she said it wasn't like us at all."

"And then?"

"It all looked quite hopeless," Bryan continued, "and I felt I had landed us both in a mess instead of helping as I had meant to do. I might have done better after all to leave it to Charles, however long he took to get down to it."

"You mean you thought your scheme was finished?"

"Cooked," said Bryan. "And worse than that. Now that I had let the thing out and not got away with it, there was the danger that Salaman might hear of the scheme, which would have been pretty fatal. You see, old Mrs. Vance might have told him all about it—and a nice hole Charles and I would have been in then! So I told her to forget about it. I wanted to make her think that it was only a tentative proposal, not anything for her to worry about: we'd asked and she'd said no, so that was all right, we'd all forget about it."

"Did you really think she would forget it?"

"No. Honestly, I can't say I did."

"In that case, Mr. Malcolm, it was a lucky thing for you that she died so soon afterwards."

"Yes," said Bryan, "it was. Extremely lucky. And that's why I didn't want to tell you. And why I didn't even tell my wife afterwards—not," he added quickly, "that I didn't know she wouldn't give me away of course, but it seemed to me that the best thing was for nobody to know about it. As I said just now, it's a thing you could easily misunderstand."

"But apparently," said Cheviot, "you saw Mr. Church come in in the middle of your talk with Mrs.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Vance, and you realized that he might have overheard something."

"I had to take a chance on that," said Bryan. "I decided to lie low, and if the worst came to the worst to make a clean breast of the whole thing, as I'm doing now. I know it looks pretty bad, but there it is."

"H'm," said Cheviot. "Well, go on. Did Mrs. Vance agree to 'forget' it?"

"No, she didn't. As a matter of fact, she kept on in a sort of tirade against Charles and me. She said we certainly should not have her money for a purpose like that, and that she wished she could forget that we had ever thought of it."

"Oh," said Cheviot. "She said she wouldn't promise her son the money?"

"Yes. She was emphatic about it. That's why I was surprised when Charles said he had got her promise. I'd meant to tell him not to ask her, after what she had said to me. Only I hadn't an opportunity. And then came her death, you see. I've no idea how he got round her, but I suppose, as my wife says, it was easier for him than for me—because he was her son, you know—and that somehow or other he was able to make the scheme sound better than I could."

"Yes," said Cheviot, rather absently. "I expect that was it."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"INTERESTING case," remarked Cheviot when we were in the passage and the door of Bryan's room was shut behind us. His tone was quite conversational, and I was encouraged to try an exchange of ideas. But before I could get started his eye was caught by Miss Bloss's name on the door of her room, and he was off at once on a new tack. Muttering cryptically "It's worth trying, anyway," he knocked and opened the door. Miss Bloss was at work in a room that was very like the one next to it, except that it contained more coloured photographs and fewer books.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything very important," Cheviot began, "but I want to stay a few minutes and ask some questions. Do you mind if I sit down?"

"Of course I don't," she answered, "only I'm afraid you can't." She gave her absurd little giggle. "You see, there isn't a chair," she said.

"Nor there is," said Cheviot. "Does that mean that you don't have any visitors, or are all the people who come and see you expected to stand?"

He was having more luck this time with the famous smile: it worked on Blossie's nerves like a sedative.

"Oh, there is a chair," she explained, "only someone has stolen it. Borrowed it, anyway. I suppose I'll get it back sometime. I went to the dark room for a few minutes and when I came back it had gone. I suppose Mr. Vance or Mr. Malcolm took it."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Pretty cool cheek," said Cheviot, "taking your furniture without a word. Is that typical of the Unit's ideas of good manners?"

"If they'd borrowed anyone else's," Blossie explained, "they'd have left a note to say where it had gone. That's the general rule. Only nobody bothers about that kind of thing with poor me."

Cheviot smiled again. "The disadvantage of that reputation for being good-tempered. But you are probably doing someone an injustice, you know. Are you quite sure there isn't a note, or something written on your blotting-pad?"

"I haven't got a blotting-pad," she answered, "and there certainly isn't a note."

"Then you ought to make a fuss about it at dinner," said Cheviot. "Meanwhile, I'll stand. Now, you remember the day Mrs. Vance died? Were you working in this room all that afternoon?"

"Except when I went to show some prints to Joan and Nevil."

"Was that in his room or hers?"

"Hers. Nevil works in the dark room."

"Do you mean that you took the prints to show them to Miss Salaman and you found Mr. Church in her room? Or did he come in later? What time was this?"

"Oh dear," she fluttered, since Cheviot had forgotten to repeat the smile. "Couldn't you ask me only one question at a time? I know I'll get all flurried if you ask a lot together like that, because of my nerves. And if I say 'Yes' to one of them and you think I mean another one, you'll think I'm not telling the truth."

"All right," said Cheviot. "When did you go to Miss Salaman's room?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Just before tea. Joan and Nevil and I went down to the common-room together at four o'clock."

"And who was in Miss Salaman's room when you reached it?"

"Only Joan. Nevil came in, a minute or two later."

"And when you three got down to the common-room for tea, who were already there?"

She puckered her forehead. "Only Mrs. Malcolm, Mrs. Rack and Mrs. Vance," she announced.

"Then," said Cheviot, "Mr. Salaman, Mr. Malcolm and Mr. Vance must all have been a little late?"

"Mr. Salaman and Charles only a minute or two," she explained. "But Bryan was very late. He said he had been guillotining prints and had stayed to finish the set."

"Ah," said Cheviot, "I should think he's a conscientious sort of chap. Just the kind of man who would miss his tea-interval to get a job of work done."

"Yes, he often does. But of course, being late for tea doesn't mean missing it. We get a quarter of an hour's break, and if you're late you can stay on after the others have gone back."

"Very sensible," said Cheviot. "I'm glad to hear there's no slave-driving here, Miss Bloss. Well, that's all right. I mustn't take up all your time, must I?"

He marched out of the room with me behind him, and this time he did not attempt any chattiness. He hunted about till he found a door lettered "Dark Room," with a little green-coloured transparent panel below the words—a panel which would be changed to red if films were being exposed. The developing was apparently done in two cabinets along the farther wall, the remainder of the room being fitted up as an office. It had no windows and was, in fact, a

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

beastly, frowsty hole which any sanitary inspector would have condemned at once as unfit for human habitation.

"Good heavens," cried Cheviot, "is this where you have to work? It's like a cell in a concentration camp. I wonder you don't pass out."

"It does get a bit close," answered Nevil. "If you're going to stay, I think you'd better leave the door open. There are a couple of ventilators, but with three of us breathing this air we'll all be in a sweat within five minutes."

"I don't like doing my stuff with the door open," said Cheviot. "So I'll see we don't stay five minutes. I suppose you take every opportunity to get out of the place and see other people in their rooms, don't you? Did you do that at all on the afternoon of the day Mrs. Vance died?"

"I don't do it when I haven't anything to go for," he answered. "Business reasons, I mean. At least, not very often. I go and see Joan sometimes, but I always take something to show her."

"Did you see her or anyone else on that afternoon?"

"I went to Mrs. Rack's room just before three, but she wasn't there and I didn't stay. Then I went to see Joan at about a quarter to four and didn't get back till after the tea break."

"Do you always go to see her at that time—or regularly to see anyone at any particular time?"

"Oh no."

"So although you left the dark room empty at that time on that day, nobody could have counted on your doing so? And nobody who saw you leave could have been sure you wouldn't return before tea?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"No. Not possibly. Sometimes I stay away for half an hour and sometimes only for a couple of minutes. I suppose you are thinking of somebody stealing cyanide from here, aren't you? If I hadn't left the room, it couldn't have been taken, could it? I mean, if I never left it at all: only of course it isn't like that really because we don't lock the dark room and anyone could come in after hours, if you see what I mean."

"That's true enough," Cheviot agreed. "But I think it is more likely that the cyanide was taken that afternoon: as far as I can see, everything happened that afternoon, more or less on the spur of the moment."

If he had had any fresh inspiration and more bright ideas I for one would have passed out from asphyxiation. Nevil was sweating heavily and Cheviot himself was beginning to turn purple. But, fortunately, he was through with his questioning just in time, so we left Nevil to sweat in his box by himself while we went out into the passage and gasped. Personally I would have voted for a turn round the garden, but Cheviot only stops working when he is stuck and at the moment he seemed extremely pleased with himself. After about three draughts of comparatively pure air he turned back along the corridor and went again into Bryan's room.

The work of the Albion Pictures Unit seemed to be suffering a good deal that afternoon. At any rate, Bryan certainly wasn't doing anything to increase its profits. His wife was still with him and we seemed to have walked in on a quarrel.

Cheviot said, "Mr. Malcolm, in view of the questions I now have to ask you, it is my duty to warn

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

you that anything you may say may be taken down in writing and used in evidence."

"That sounds bad," answered Bryan. "Damned bad, in fact. I hope to goodness you aren't taking things too seriously. I told you I didn't like the way things were looking and of course I realize that anyone who judged only by appearances might jump to conclusions about me. But I had an idea that you had too much common sense for that, Inspector."

"Mr. Malcolm," said Cheviot, "you told me a lie, just now. It wasn't on a very important matter, but the fact that you think it necessary to tell me one lie may be very important indeed. It may very well mean that you have told others as well. What did you do when you went out of this room to fetch a chair, half an hour ago, and stayed away for two minutes? You told me it took that long because you had to write a note for Miss Bloss. But I happen to know that you did not leave any such note."

Bryan laughed: there was a noticeable touch of nervousness and perhaps of relief in the sound. "Oh, that?" he cried. "By jove, you put the wind up me for a moment: I thought you must have twisted something so that it looked serious against me. But I'm sorry if I misled you with that little story. I daresay it was silly to tell it. In fact I'd have seen it would be if I had realized how sharp you are, but it never occurred to me that you'd take the trouble to check a small point like that. You see, when you came bouncing in just now, wanting to know about my last interview with Mrs. Vance, of course I guessed at once that Nevil had been talking. That meant that you would be able to work up a case of a sort against me, and I suddenly realized that I wasn't prepared

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

for it. I ought to have been, because God knows I've thought often enough in the last few days about the possibility, and I've rehearsed what I'd say in reply. Only I had been lulled into a false security when the local police didn't get on to it and Nevil seemed to be keeping his mouth shut; and so when you came out with it, it was rather a bad shock. I just had to pull myself together. I went to get that chair—well, you had to have a chair, anyway—and while I was away I took a minute or two to get a grip of myself. When I came back I thought I ought to account for having been so long away, so on the spur of the moment I brought out that story about writing a chit for Blossie. As I say, it was foolish and I apologize. It would have been better to have been quite straightforward."

"It certainly would," said Cheviot. "I hope we shan't get anything else of that sort, Mr. Malcolm. Now, would you like to account for your movements between 3.45 and 4.15 on the day Mrs. Vance died?"

"Certainly," Bryan answered. "A quarter to four till a quarter past, you say? H'm. Well, I didn't go anywhere, if that's what you mean by 'movements,' except down to tea and back again to my room. I started a job—guillotining a lot of prints—about half-past three and I kept right on till past tea-time. I don't really know what time I got it done——"

"You were very late for tea," Mrs. Malcolm put in. "Everyone else had nearly finished."

"That's right. I don't think I got to the common-room till about ten past four."

"Did you go straight from this room to the common-room, or did you go into any other room on the way?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"I went straight, of course. By that time I was badly wanting a cup of tea and I didn't want to find it too cold."

"And then," Cheviot suggested, "you stayed on after the others left. You took your full quarter of an hour, I suppose?"

"Nearly. I drank my tea and ate my cake and smoked a cigarette."

"While only your wife and Mrs. Vance were in the room." Cheviot turned abruptly to Mrs. Malcolm. "Were you in the common-room when your husband left it?"

"No," she answered. "I took the tea-things away to wash them."

"So you left the common-room a minute or two after a quarter past four?"

"It may have been twenty past," she said.

"Leaving your husband and Mrs. Vance together?"

"Yes."

Bryan said, "Hell! You know, this is all getting uncommonly awkward. I know what you are getting at, Inspector, perfectly well. Of course you meant just now that I had an opportunity to slip into the dark room after Nevil left it at four o'clock and to take a pinch of the cyanide. I suppose I had, though I should think other people had as well. Anyone who didn't turn up punctually to tea that day, or at any rate anyone who came in after Nevil. But I don't know anything about that because, having been late myself, I don't know who arrived when. And I am afraid I can't prove that I stayed here till well after four and then walked straight to the common-room. But for all that I certainly did."

He paused, looking at Cheviot as if he expected

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

him to say something, but Cheviot, watching him carefully, kept silent.

"I don't see that you can build up much of a case on that," Bryan went on, "unless you can prove that nobody else could possibly have taken cyanide out of the dark room at any other time: and I'll bet you can't do that. But the other point in your mind is trickier—a lot trickier. Your idea is, obviously, that after my wife went out with the tea-things, leaving me alone with Mrs. Vance, I might have slipped cyanide into her medicine. Well, I'm in the deuce of a hole there, I really am. You see—and you'll admit I'm being straightforward this time—a minute or two after my wife went away with the tea-things, Mrs. Vance went out of the room and left me alone. So of course if I had had cyanide on me I had a perfect opportunity to put it into her medicine."

Cheviot said quietly, "Why are you telling me this, Mr. Malcolm?"

"Well, why shouldn't I?" Bryan retorted. "You preached to me just now about not telling lies, and obviously you are the sort of sharp chap it doesn't pay to tell 'em to. Not that I like telling them in any case. And the chances are that somebody saw Mrs. Vance about that time and will tell you sooner or later that she wasn't in the common-room then. So you'll know that I was alone there. Come to that, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you'd found it out already and have just been leading me along to see what I'd admit. Trying to trip me up, in fact. Is that it?"

"You can hardly expect me to answer that," said Cheviot. "But I'd like to know why you told me a few minutes ago that your talk with Mrs. Vance in

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

the morning was the last time you were alone with her. You say you are now being straightforward, Mr. Malcolm, but that statement hardly fits with this one—that you had another interview alone with her after tea.”

“I don’t see why it doesn’t,” Bryan retorted. “You asked about an ‘interview,’ not merely when I was in the same room with her. When my wife left us, after tea, we didn’t talk at all—she seemed a bit sleepy and preoccupied, and I was enjoying my smoke. That isn’t what I call an ‘interview.’”

“H’m,” said Cheviot. “Sometimes you brazenly admit having lied to me, Mr. Malcolm, and at other times you produce these slick explanations to show that you haven’t lied. Your statements need very careful watching.”

“My dear chap,” answered Bryan, “I’m not trying to mislead you. On the contrary I’m giving you all the help I can. It is your being so confoundedly suspicious that makes the trouble. If you’d only stop regarding me as your No. 1 Suspect you wouldn’t be continually tripping me up on mere words.”

Cheviot refused to be side-tracked. “We’ll go back to Mrs. Vance,” he said. “You now say that after you had been in the common-room with her, without there being any conversation between you, she went out of the room. How long did she stay away?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t stay long after that myself.”

“Oh, didn’t you? Not to finish your full quarter of an hour break, you mean? Why didn’t you?”

“There was nothing to stay for,” Bryan answered. “I had drunk cold tea and eaten a dry bit of cake and lit a cigarette, and had nobody to talk to after the first three or four minutes. So I turned it up and

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

went back to my room. I don't know what time that was—probably not more than a couple of minutes after Mrs. Vance left."

"Did you meet her in the passage?" Cheviot demanded.

"No, I didn't see 'a sign of her. Oh, I see what you are getting at. If I didn't meet her, she can't have returned to the common-room for a couple of minutes or more after I left the room empty. And quite possibly she didn't return till some time after that. At any rate nobody can prove she wasn't away a quarter of an hour or more. By jove, that's a good point! It means that someone else could have slipped into the common-room after I left and have been alone with that medicine bottle. In other words, my chance of putting poison in the bottle is no greater than anyone else's. Whew! Well, thank goodness for that. I've been so worried about the case you were trying to work up against me that I missed that point entirely."

He turned away from Cheviot and looked across the desk at his wife.

"You see," he said to her, "I haven't got myself into quite such a hopeless mess as you imagined!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

"You see how things are heading?" Cheviot remarked to me when we were in the passage. "It was beginning to look like an easy case against Bryan Malcolm, but here is the difficulty. I expect he did take the cyanide just before tea, and I expect he did drop it into the medicine twenty minutes later. But knowing that is of no use to us if either Charles Vance or Salaman had the same opportunity. And I'm afraid we'll find that one of them, or both of them, had. If one had it, that stops us. You know," he added with rather a grim smile, "this is probably the first time in the history of crime that a detective has really wanted a suspect to have a cast-iron alibi!"

Cheviot decided to check up on Charles Vance first. We found him in a little office that was almost identical with Bryan's.

"Mr. Vance," Cheviot began, "I understand that on the day your mother died you came to tea three or four minutes late. Why was that?"

Charles, who had been studying prints through a magnifying glass, looked up with a puzzled frown. "I daresay I did," he said. "In fact I know I did. About five minutes, I think. But that kind of thing doesn't trouble you, does it? I thought you had something much more important to get on with."

"I want to find out," Cheviot explained, "where everyone was between a quarter to four and the time when you were all together in the common-room."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Oh," said Charles. "All right. But you might have left me out. You aren't suggesting that I could have murdered my own mother, are you? Because if so——" He broke off suddenly and gave a little humourless laugh. "But of course you aren't. You couldn't be. It's just what you chaps call 'routine,' asking the same questions of everyone. Sorry I let myself get excited, Inspector. My nerves, as Blossie would say. I've got frightfully jumpy lately, ready to snap at everyone. And I can't say that what you've done so far has helped to make me feel any better. The way you fastened at once on to poor old Bryan! There you are, you see, I call him that automatically although more than half the time I'm thinking——"

"Mr. Vance," said Cheviot, "do you mind answering my question?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Of course. Yes, you see I made myself late on purpose. I thought if I gave myself that excuse I could stay on when the others went back to work, and then I should have a good opportunity of speaking to my mother. About her money, you know. Only the scheme didn't work, because Bryan came in much later still—well, about five minutes after me—and I didn't care to hang about for ten minutes till he had finished his tea and gone. So I left speaking to her till later and went out with the others at a quarter past four."

"From a quarter to four till five past, when you reached the common-room, you were in here alone?"

"Oh yes."

"Then you can't produce any evidence to prove, for example, that you didn't go into the dark room during that time?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Charles stared at him; his mouth slowly opening. Then he got to his feet and stood with his fingers spread out on the desk-top.

"Good—God!" he said. "Then you really are thinking—— You're suggesting—— My God, it's a damnable suggestion."

"Can you produce that evidence?" Cheviot insisted.

Charles suddenly sat down again, his fists tightly clenched, the knuckles showing white.

"No, I can't," he said. "And I'm not at all sure that I should trouble to if I could. I wouldn't have thought that anyone, even a policeman, could have such a blackguardly idea as that."

"I didn't say I had," retorted Cheviot. "Now, there is another period. From twenty minutes past four till—well, say for another quarter of an hour. Where were you then?"

For quite a minute, Charles sat staring at Cheviot without a word. Then he said, "Well, I suppose I've got to answer, or goodness knows what you'll think. So I'll try to bottle up what I feel about all this and tell you. After tea, that is at a quarter past four, I came straight back here. After a few minutes' work, I went into the passage meaning to go along and see Joan. But I changed my mind and came back and stayed here till five. Then I went down to the common-room and had things out with my mother. I've no evidence to prove it. Absolutely none. But that's what I did."

"I see," said Cheviot. "Why did you change your mind about going to see Miss Salaman?"

"When I got into the passage," Charles explained, "I saw my mother just ahead of me, going into Joan's

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

room. So as what I had to do there wasn't really important. I decided not to interrupt them."

"Oh," said Cheviot. "Then that's where she went. That's interesting. All right, Mr. Vance. That'll do for now. But I'm sorry you couldn't produce that evidence—particularly about the second period, which is probably when the cyanide was added to your mother's medicine. I suppose there is absolutely no chance of it—no phone calls, or anything like that?"

"No," said Charles. "Nothing. If you can't take my word for it—well, there you are. But—I'd like to ask you why on earth you've got this preposterous, this ghastly idea. I told you this morning—it was this morning, wasn't it? seems days ago—that I was devoted to my mother. I suppose anyone who knows me would confirm that. No one has ever suggested—And now you come along with this terrible idea that *I* killed her! My God!"

With an effort, he seemed to take a new grip on himself.

"God knows I'm trying to keep calm about this," he went on, "though it's devilish difficult. I thought I'd been having a bad enough time all through, with my mother being killed like that, and then that idea that it was old Bryan who had killed her. That was beastly enough, but this—this absolutely damnable idea that I killed her! My God!"

Cheviot went out of the room without another word. It didn't seem to worry him at all that Charles was badly upset—but then he never cares much about people's feelings. He could have set things right and left Charles much happier by telling him in a couple of sentences how things stood, but he just didn't

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

bother. I doubt whether, in his preoccupation, he even thought of it. All he said to me when we got outside was, "I was afraid so. Now we're stuck. Oh well, I suppose we may as well follow the new trail down to Miss Salaman and see if we get any help from that. If we don't, we are in a jam."

Joan smiled at Cheviot directly she saw him. It wasn't what I call a clean sort of smile—I mean, it didn't arise from pleasure or amusement but came out of a stock-cupboard, where it was kept with other varieties till it was wanted.

She said, "Have you come to apologize? Interviewing everybody else and leaving me out as if I didn't matter in the least—I've felt quite hurt about it."

"My visits aren't always so warmly welcomed," answered Cheviot. "Miss Salaman, were you alone in this room after you got back from tea on the day Mrs. Vance died?"

"Only for about five minutes," she answered. "Then Auntie Lou came to see me."

"Auntie Lou? Do you mean Mrs. Vance?"

She nodded. "I've called her Auntie Lou since I was sixteen."

"How long did she stay?"

"Till nearly five."

"Oh, as long as that? What did she come for, Miss Salaman?"

"Just for a chat. She often used to come. In fact, I got that chair specially for her. I suppose you've noticed that the other rooms have the sort of chair you get in offices in these days: I didn't like Auntie Lou having to use one like that, poor old thing, so I bought the one you are sitting in. She was a silly old

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

busybody in some ways, but for all that we were rather fond of one another."

"What did you chat about, on this occasion?" Cheviot asked. "This may be important, because I am anxious to know what was in Mrs. Vance's mind at that time, just three hours before her death."

"Then I'm afraid this won't help you," she retorted with a rather hard laugh. "As a matter of fact, she came here to tell me off. Used to fancy she was responsible for the morals of a motherless child. Rather trying for me, of course, seeing that she was eighty-four and full of Victorian ideas of why girls go wrong!"

"So she thought you in danger?"

"Oh, frightfully much. I'm most unladylike. I flirt. At least, she used to say I did!"

"And who are you flirting with at the moment?"

"Well!" cried Joan. "Of all the cheek! Are you asking so that you can cut him out?"

"I'm afraid I've no time for that kind of thing," said Cheviot severely and rather too primly. "Whom are you having this affair with, Miss Salaman?"

"Oh, it's not nearly thrilling enough to be called an affair," she answered. "It's with Nevil, if you want to know. But my best endeavours only arouse him to poetry. Awfully dull! He's attractive, but a bit of a stick. And too young for me, anyway."

At that, she produced another bit of "Come hither" out of her stock-cupboard. It proclaimed, without words, that Cheviot was of a more suitable age.

Cheviot marched out of the room without another word, leaving the smile frozen behind him. "That hasn't led us anywhere," he said. "In fact, I'm not merely stuck, I'm sunk. Or I shall be if I don't very

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

quickly get a new idea." He broke off and looked at me vaguely, appearing after a moment to recognize me. "If you want to mooch around, Ross," he said, "or if you've a taste for accompanying that bit of beauty along the downward path, don't let me keep you. Only don't bother me with your chatter. I've got to think things out."

At that moment he sighted Mrs. Malcolm at the end of the corridor and went to ask her which was our room for the night. Mrs. Malcolm led us out into the yard and over to a separate building, the first-floor flat in which was labelled "No 3: Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm," while that below it was marked "No 4," with the name "Mrs. Vance," in front of that of Mr. Vance, scored out.

I looked at Mrs. Vance's bedroom with considerable interest. The furniture presumably belonged to Mr. Salaman, but the ornaments and trimmings certainly to Mrs. Vance. To an up-to-date mind they were rather revolting. The main idea seemed to have been to crowd things in wherever they would go, without any regard to design, colour or general effect. The walls at eye-level were completely hidden by photographs of people in out-of-date fashions, "tidies" (if that is what you call bits of cardboard with cup-shaped protuberances to hold pins and snippets of hair) and calendars. It seemed that every member of the staff of the Albion Picture Unit, besides three other people, had had the original idea of giving Mrs. Vance a calendar the previous Christmas. The mantelpiece was a welter of small china ornaments, mostly of the "Present from Margate" quality.

But although that kind of room isn't at all to my taste, it did somehow create a picture of old Mrs.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Vance. I couldn't imagine what she would have been like in the eighteen-eighties, when the late Mr. Vance Senior was alive to take her to balls, but remembering all we had been told, I could conjure up some sort of picture of her as she had been recently. A frail little old woman (I am sure she must have been tiny) living rather too long and probably quite conscious of the fact, struggling against the boredom of endless days by endeavouring to interest herself in the affairs of all the people around her, filling long hours alone in the common-room by thinking over their problems and sometimes getting into a state of confusion over them; perplexed and regretful when Mrs. Rackstraw "bit" at her, anxious (and not without reason, I should say) about Joan Salaman's morals, seriously worried and perturbed about her son Charles and the almost criminal scheme he was building up with Bryan Malcolm. And then at the end of the day, tired because she had stayed up too long—and also because she was so very old—she would come to bed in this room, bringing all her worries and doubts to her only place of privacy, where, from the little narrow bed, she would chatter about them to herself or, almost consciously, to the silk-bloused ladies and the terrifically moustachioed gentlemen who had given her their photographs and had once been her intimate friends. And especially, no doubt, to the late Mr. Vance, whose picture hung over the bed—by the look of him "a gentleman in khaki, ordered south."

While I mooned about the room examining calendars and thinking those deep thoughts, Cheviot flung himself full-length on the bed and became oblivious to everything except his problem. Now and then he

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

moaned, or turned over with violence, flinging out frantic arms. Then suddenly he sat up and spoke.

"It is the very devil," he cried. "I once solved a murder case in sixteen hours and took my man off to the cells. Everyone at the Yard called it a record. Now I've solved one in just seven hours, but I can't round it off with an arrest because I haven't a scrap of evidence to take to court. And if I go on for another nine hours, or ninety hours, I still shan't have it. I don't believe I shall ever have it."

So far in this case he had been in a pretty good mood. But I knew from experience that in depressed moments he could become a cross between a sour-tempered curmudgeon and a raving lunatic. He was working himself up to that state now. At the moment he was still talking fairly lucidly—but I knew the signs.

"I'm absolutely certain that Bryan Malcolm murdered Mrs. Vance," he cried. "I've known it ever since he tried in that artful way to get me interested in Charles Vance. He told me just enough to lead me to ask for the details he wanted me to hear, he protested but not too vigorously against having to give them to me himself, and then gave me a mouthful. Pretending that he wanted to show that Charles hadn't a motive, he carefully showed me just how big that motive was.

"At tea, he went out of his way to produce Mrs. Rackstraw as another possibility.

"Since I began to push him, after hearing Nevil's story of the interview with Mrs. Vance, he has told me lie after lie and specious truth after specious truth. I know his motive, I know when he took the cyanide and when he put it into the medicine. What's more,

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

by now he knows exactly how much I know, and he is intelligent enough to realize that it isn't any use to me. That's why he is laughing at me all the time. Being that sort of chap, it is funny to him. He has done a murder and got away with it, because, though I know he did it, I can't prove my case. If I try—if I arrest him and take him into court—he'll produce witnesses to prove that other people had just the same opportunity as himself at every point: motive, means, opportunity and all the rest of it. Of course I can't risk that; of course he knows I can't risk it. So he can afford to laugh at me, damn him. Hell! I'm sunk."

He got up and walked two or three times across the small bedroom. Then he said suddenly, "I'm going to talk it over with Lanfier. You'd better come too."

This seemed likely to mean missing our dinner, and therefore didn't appeal to me at all. But obviously this wasn't a moment for raising trivial issues, so I became the dutiful lamb and went out at Cheviot's heels.

Superintendent Lanfier, though he had his hat and coat on, had not left for home and he gave the impression of not having a wife or a housekeeper who would mind if he kept a dinner waiting till it got burnt or cold.

And as a matter of fact he hadn't, for the first thing he said to us was, "Invited yourselves to dinner, eh? Well, come along, I was just off to get mine. I'm a bachelor, and it's less trouble to go out for meals. I usually dine at the Avonbridge Arms. Will you join me, both of you?"

I hastened to give thanks for both, and luckily

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Cheviot let it go. When the food was on the table, the Superintendent asked, "Well, Inspector, solved the mystery yet?"

"I know who killed Mrs. Vance," Cheviot answered. "But I've no proof."

"Ah. No," said Lanfier when he had heard the details. "There's nothing there that you can take to court, I agree. All the same, it's nice work and you've been remarkably quick about it. I congratulate you, Inspector."

"Thanks, Super," said Cheviot. "But you couldn't include a spot of help with the congratulations, I suppose? I'm not young enough to smile all over my face because I'm patted on the back, but some real assistance never comes amiss. Particularly when I'm stuck."

Lafier stoked himself up with pie. "If I'd thought myself clever enough to work things out for myself," he laughed, "I wouldn't have let 'em insult me by sending for you. But I know my limitations, and a murder case is a mile beyond them. Sorry, Inspector."

"Then you didn't get anything useful that I've missed?" Cheviot urged. "I had half a hope as I came along—I suppose because it was the only thing I could think of to hope for—that as you worked on different lines when you were on the case, you might have picked up some detail that didn't mean anything to you but would be mighty useful to me."

"Oh, I see," said Lanfier. "Well, I wouldn't know that, would I? I don't see how I could know the value of things that didn't mean anything to me. But you can go through our dossier if you like. It's pretty complete, as far as it goes. After this we'll slip round

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

and get it from the station, and you can take it away with you."

Cheviot suggested sending me to fetch the papers. But Lanfier said there was no hurry. "Tell me about London," he said, and for three-quarters of an hour he and Cheviot yarned together and told delicious stories of murder and rape and so on.

Thanks to that and the fact that Lanfier didn't understand his own filing system and nobody on the night staff at the police station knew it either, we didn't leave Avonbridge till half-past nine and it was nearly ten before we had got back to the farm and put the car away in Salaman's garage.

When we got to our room, Cheviot cleared Mrs. Vance's poor ornaments off her dressing-table and spread out the dossier. It was a voluminous affair, consisting of records of wordy interviews written in a constable's sprawly hand. For half an hour I stood behind Cheviot looking down at it over his shoulder and occasionally deciphering a word. Then I got the fidgets, until Cheviot found my presence painful and distracting and said, "You can go to bed if you like, Ross. You'd better take the bed. I shan't want it for hours anyhow, and by the time I'm through with this I'll be tired enough to sleep on anything."

He seemed to mean it, so I took him at his word, put on my pyjamas, and got into Mrs. Vance's bed. I slept, as I always do, like an innocent child. I awoke at one a.m. when Cheviot banged his fist down on the dressing-table and cried, "My God!" Then he had one of his mad fits, dashing over to the wash-hand-stand and sluicing all his head with cold water, darting back, without bothering about a towel and with water dripping off him on to the carpet and

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Superintendent Lanfier's papers, and began reading again.

I tumbled out of bed and wandered over to see what all the trouble was about. He had got to the last page of the dossier, which wasn't in the constable's handwriting but was filled with strange hieroglyphics, apparently comprising the analyst's report on Mrs. Vance's medicine.

Over his shoulder and without even noticing that I had got up, Cheviot shouted, "Ross! Ross! Wake up, man." He leapt about a yard when I answered within an inch of his ear.

"Oh, there you are," he cried. "Why the devil aren't you dressed? Get some clothes on at once. We've got to go out, down to Avonbridge. And for God's sake hurry."

He didn't wait for me to put on a collar and tie, but went bounding down the stairs and out into the yard. He dashed to the garage, found the door locked and swore like a trooper. I suggested that we could get into the garage through the house. So while I gratefully took advantage of the chance to finish dressing, Cheviot ran to the front door, found it locked, ran to the back door, found that locked too, swore again and cried, "What the hell do we do now?"

As it happened, on our way across the yard with Mrs. Malcolm, when she showed us to our room, I had noticed what looked like a bicycle shed; so I mentioned the fact, thereby sending Cheviot off again at a run across the yard. The shed proved to contain two bicycles, probably, and judging by their size, owned by Mrs. Rackstraw and Blossie. On these we mounted and rode, like the chap who brought the

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

good news from Ghent to Aix, from Avonside Farm to Avonbridge.

There we bounded into the police station and Cheviot horrified the sergeant on night duty by demanding Superintendent Lanfier's home address. He certainly would not have got it, despite all the prestige of Scotland Yard, if his wildly excited manner hadn't given the sergeant the impression that at least a second murder had been committed at Avonside Farm. But that idea broke down normal official barriers, and five minutes later Cheviot and I were standing outside a small, red-brick house, where Cheviot's violent ringing of the bell at last brought Lanfier, tousled, sleepy and pyjama-clad, to the door.

"What the—— Oh, it's you, Inspector. What on earth are you doing here at this hour of the night? Anything serious?"

"Yes, pretty serious," said Cheviot. "I've an important question to ask you."

"A question? You mean you've brought me out of bed at two in the morning to ask a question?"

"You're lucky to have been in bed," Cheviot retorted. "I haven't yet, and I doubt if I shall to-night. After this I've got to dash off and drag your analyst out of his bed."

He waved the report in front of Lanfier. "Have you read this?" he demanded.

"What is it? Give it to me. How do you suppose I can see what it is while you wave it about? That's better. Oh, this is the analyst's report on that bottle of medicine, isn't it? No, of course I haven't read it. I can't understand a word of that scientific jargon."

"But," Cheviot persisted, "you know the substance of what it says. The analyst must have told you."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Of course he did. I thought you knew all that before you started on the case. There's enough cyanide in the medicine to kill three people, apart from the quantity that was found in the body."

"I know that," said Cheviot. "But what else was there?"

"The medicine, according to the doctor's prescription. The analyst told me it tallied exactly."

Cheviot, getting more excited every minute, was almost dancing on the doorstep. "That's what he says in his report," he cried. "And if he confirms it, it alters the whole case."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Lanfier. "And anyway it's beastly cold in this doorway. What did you expect him to find?"

"Essence of almonds, of course," answered Cheviot.

CHAPTER NINE

I MUST admit that that shook me pretty much as it shook Superintendent Lanfier. Salaman had put the essence into Mrs. Vance's medicine, and yet here was the bottle of medicine without it. Just like a conjuring trick, except that a conjurer might make a whole bottle disappear but he could hardly get out one ingredient from a mixture. In fact, the thing wasn't possible, nobody could do that, so it followed that——

"You'd better come inside, Inspector," said Lanfier. "This wants a bit of thought. Sit down. Just a minute: I'll put the kettle on and we'll have something hot to warm us."

He rejoined us within a few seconds. "This is my fault," he explained; "that point being missed. I mean, I can't put the blame on the analyst. He was given the bottle and the doctor's prescription and told to look for a poison. It wasn't till after we'd got his report that we learnt from Salaman about the essence of almonds. I didn't go back to the analyst on that—he had done his job when he found the cyanide. Silly of me, if you like. Damned silly, if you like. But I just didn't think of it. Anyhow, tell me what it means."

"I've not worked it all out yet," said Cheviot. "But there must have been two medicine bottles: one supplied by the doctor and containing medicine plus the essence which Salaman added, and one prepared

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

by the murderer, containing medicine plus cyanide but no essence. The murderer must have substituted his bottle for the doctor's bottle just before the murder."

"Yes, I see that," said Lanfier. "But would there have been enough medicine to fill two bottles?"

"Not unless the murderer is a qualified chemist with a dispensary at his disposal, and that's most unlikely. On the other hand, the bottle you've got—which must be the murderer's, because there is cyanide in it—was found by the analyst to be half-full of full-strength medicine. Look here, let's work it out in doses—that will be clearer, I think. The doctor put up enough medicine to make twenty-four teaspoon doses. The bottle you've got contains eleven of them, and Mrs. Vance took out of it the one that killed her—that's twelve accounted for. But the other bottle, out of which she took medicine for a week, appeared to be full when it first came into her hands, although in fact it can only have contained twelve doses in space provided for twenty-four. Therefore those twelve doses must have been filled up with water. There was no danger about that, from the murderer's point of view: Mrs. Vance hadn't taken that particular medicine before, so she wouldn't notice its weakness; and that bottle disappeared before the murder, when the other was substituted for it, so that what we found was full-strength medicine and cyanide."

"I get you," said Lanfier. "The murderer—he or she, but I'll say he for short—must have got hold of the doctor's bottle directly it arrived, or at any rate before Mrs. Vance took the first dose, and poured half its contents into an exactly similar bottle with an

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

exactly similar label, which he locked away till he wanted it. Then he must have filled up the half-empty bottle with water, and have got it into Mrs. Vance's hands without anyone suspecting that it had been tampered with."

"Exactly," said Cheviot. "Mrs. Vance must then have taken nine doses of medicine and water, followed by three doses of medicine and water plus essence of almonds. Then the murderer must have substituted his other bottle, to which he had added cyanide. Mrs. Vance took a dose from that and died."

"Yes," said Lanfier. A sound from the kitchen made him hurry out of the room. He came back a moment later carrying tea and milk and cups. "Of course," he said, "my men will help you by searching for the missing bottle, but I imagine the murderer will have taken good care we shan't find it. Or if we do, it will be just an ordinary bottle, with nothing to identify it as the one we want."

"I don't see that we do want it, except that it might impress a jury without proving anything to them," said Cheviot. "The one we've got, with the cyanide in it, is the business one, the one that matters. By the way, do we get any help from fingerprints?"

Lanfier shook his head. "None," he said. "There's an old one of the doctor's, but we can't say how old so it doesn't tell us much, except that the murderer used a bottle once supplied by Dr. Morgan: there must have been plenty of old ones lying about the house. The other prints on the bottle are Salaman's, Malcolm's, Mrs. Rackstraw's and Mrs. Vance's. That was explained by Salaman who said that after Mrs. Vance's death various people held the bottle, looking at it and sniffing it, as if to see what was wrong with

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

it. Then, according to his statement, he took it away from them and locked it in his desk. I'm afraid you won't get any help there."

"Oh well, I didn't expect it," said Cheviot. "Murderers know too much nowadays to leave their prints on bottles of poison. Anyway, it doesn't matter."

Before he sprang his big surprise, he had been all nerves and excitement. Then he had become calm and explanatory. Now, when the reaction ought to have got properly going and he should have been in depths of misery because the new discovery had sent his case against Bryan Malcolm all haywire, he was looking thoroughly cheerful and pleased with himself. In the circumstances, it didn't seem a reasonable attitude. Or even a sane one.

Lanfier seemed to be feeling as I was doing. "I suppose you are one of those people who find defeat exhilarating," he said. "Good for you if you can: you are going to need something to buck you up. You are right back now at the start, with a good day's work totally wasted."

Cheviot's surprise looked quite genuine. "Oh, but surely not?" he cried.

"I should say so," said Lanfier. "As the murderer began operations when the medicine bottle came, a good week before Mrs. Vance died, the murder can't have been done on impulse caused by the opportunity provided by the smell of almonds getting into the medicine, as you supposed. That alone busts your case, because it knocks out Malcolm's motive which only came into being thirty-six hours before the old lady died."

"Oh, I see what you mean," said Cheviot. "Yes, it puts me wrong about the motive, of course. But that's

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

all to the good, isn't it? It was obvious that the reason why I couldn't prove my case against Malcolm was that I had got some of the details wrong. As we now know, I was wrong about the motive. Now that I've found that out, I shall be able to get the point straight: I shall find his real motive, and that will lead me to evidence on which I can hang him."

I was staring at him. So, for that matter, was the superintendent.

"Do you mean to say," I cried, "that you still believe it was Bryan Malcolm?"

"Of course I do," said Cheviot.

"But, my dear chap," cried Lanfier, "you've no longer a shred of evidence against him. I'll agree, if you like, that you can't count him out: he's still a suspect, just as all the others are. But there isn't anything more against him than there is against them—and that, as a matter of fact, considering them individually, is just exactly nothing. You had a motive which applied to Malcolm and Charles Vance; but this evidence finishes that. Otherwise you've nothing at all, except opportunities of getting the cyanide and of putting it into the medicine, which are about equal for them all. So you are right back at the beginning."

Cheviot smiled at him. He still looked completely self-confident. "Yes," he said, "I'm back at the beginning and have to start again. But with one difference. This time I know the identity of the murderer."

Lanfier said, "Then you must have something big against Malcolm that I don't know of. What is it? He hasn't confessed, has he?"

"Not in words," answered Cheviot. "He has too much sense to do that. But for all that he has his guilt written all over him. If he were innocent and

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

yet as obviously on the point of being arrested for murder as he has been all this afternoon, he would be scared stiff. Being hanged isn't any nicer when you know you're innocent—rather the contrary. But Malcolm isn't scared, he is enjoying himself. What he is enjoying is watching me flounder about. He knows that I've spotted him as the murderer, but he knows equally well that I can't prove it. I've given away enough of my case for him to be able to see where I'm wrong, and he knows that those mistakes will prevent me from getting evidence to justify arresting him. So he feels quite safe and thinks he can laugh at me. Every time I approach what looks like some useful piece of evidence, he quickly points out that it applies equally to other people. It does, of course, because those aren't the right points of evidence. When I find his real motive, it will apply to no one except himself. Then everything else will fit in. Yes, and then he'll stop laughing. You'll see, Super, I shall get Mr. Bryan Malcolm quite quickly now."

Superintendent Lanfier yawned. It was about as expressive a yawn as I've seen for many a day. "Sounds optimistic to me," he said. "Though how you can be optimistic at three in the morning, God knows. I certainly can't. Well, it's your job, Inspector, so I'll leave you to it. You won't have any more tea, will you? In that case, if you won't think me frightfully inhospitable, I think I'll go back to bed."

That, of course, was where the superintendent scored: in being able to slip back into his bed, I mean, without having first to cycle six miles in the dark, with an apparently demented detective-inspector as companion. For the first two or three miles I

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

pedalled along in silence while he rode with a sort of gay abandon so that at every minute I expected him to burst into song. Then I couldn't stand it any more and I drew alongside him.

"Look here," I said, "are you really as daft as you sound, or were you only pulling the Super's leg?"

"I meant every word of it, Ross," he answered, "and it is certainly not 'daft.' Come to that, I don't much like that expression. Nor would the authorities at the Yard like it, as coming to me from 'a detective-sergeant.'"

It was ridiculous of him to take the official attitude at that moment, when he was riding on a girl's bicycle several sizes too small for him and looking, as far as I could see in the darkness, rather like a monkey on a stick. But that wasn't the point I wanted to argue about, so I said "Sorry." Then I went on, "But, seriously, you do mean to concentrate on Bryan, assuming that he did the murder, without starting fresh enquiries about all the others?"

Cheviot said, "Of course. There's no doubt about it. You've had all the opportunities of watching him that I've had: I should have thought you'd have seen it for yourself."

"I've seen him laughing—well, laughing at you, if you like. But that isn't necessarily a sign of guilt. I'll admit that if we knew from other evidence—real evidence—that he was the murderer, that attitude might fit in in the way you say it does. It might, though equally it might not. But when there's no other reason for thinking him guilty, I don't see that it's anything against him, let alone being a dead sure proof, as you seem to think, that he killed Mrs. Vance. I just don't see why you should take it that way. He's

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

a pretty self-confident sort of cove and he might laugh at the idea of being arrested for murder simply because he couldn't believe it could happen. I should think he's got just that kind of humour. Not much imagination, you know, and he'd think it a frightful joke that you could have fastened on to an innocent chap like him."

Out of the darkness came Cheviot's laugh. "First fumblings of our new detective-sergeant into the realm of psychology," he said. "But you're wrong, Ross, quite wrong. And you'll see in a day or so that I'm right. 'Hell!'"

He put on his brakes very suddenly and jumped off the bicycle. I pulled up more gently and came back to join him. "We've come all these miles for nothing," he cried. "I've been thinking out a plan of action for to-morrow—to-day, I mean—and I quite forgot that I've got to see the analyst and make absolutely sure that the essence of almonds wasn't in the bottle he examined. So now we'll have to go back. Thank goodness the chap put his address at the bottom of his report. Otherwise we'd have had to dig old Lanfier out again, and he wouldn't be pleased. Come on. It won't take more than another hour."

I suggested mildly that my presence was hardly necessary, but Cheviot said calmly, "Oh, you might as well tag along," and so we cycled all the way back to Avonbridge, dragged out of bed a highly indignant analyst, learnt that when he wrote an official report it was always strictly accurate and that he didn't regard it as necessary to question it at 4 a.m., and so at last rode very sleepily back to Avonside Farm. I wasn't by that time thinking any more about Mrs.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Vance's murderer or Cheviot's daft ideas: the only question in the world that I cared about was whether Cheviot was going to insist on having the bed for what was left of the night. Fortunately, he didn't. He said it wasn't worth while sleeping and he was going to think: he collapsed into the one armchair to do that while I snuggled between the sheets.

I had to wake him in the morning, and naturally I didn't hurry about it. So we got down to breakfast twenty minutes late, Cheviot looking as tousled as I was feeling. The others had finished eating by then and Bryan, with his elbows on the table, appeared once again to be arguing with Mrs. Rackstraw. He broke off as we came into the room and said, "Good Lord, Inspector, you aren't wanting breakfast, are you? There are two schools of thought here about you: one, headed by Mrs. Rack and Nevil, says that you raided the kitchen at six and have been working ever since, while the other, headed by me, holds that you are the sort of tough guy who wouldn't trouble to sleep or eat till your job was done. And now you confound us all by coming in at half-past eight, demanding food and looking as if you'd got the hang-over of the century. What have you been doing? Did you and the sergeant go on the tiles, or have you been using your great brain all night thinking up some new bit of trickery?"

Before Cheviot could disentangle his tongue from a large mouthful of Mrs. Malcolm's glutinous porridge, Charles said, "They were certainly moving about for most of the night. You know how noises sound in that building. I only got about two hours' sleep."

"I didn't sleep particularly well," said Cheviot,

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"except between seven and eight, when I ought to have been getting up."

"Bad luck," said Bryan. "Personally I slept like a top for nearly nine hours. I always do. The reward of an easy conscience, I suppose. Though mind you," he added, "I had plenty of excuse for staying awake last night. Not in the matter of conscience, which is as sound as ever—though you won't believe that, I suppose, Inspector—but because I was scared stiff. I daresay you get used to this kind of thing, but in the initial stages it's the devil. Being Scotland Yard's No. 1 Suspect, I mean."

"Oh, Bryan," giggled Miss Bloss, "you can't possibly be that. No one could imagine that you'd—I mean, it's absurd, isn't it?"

She seemed to be appealing to everyone at the table.

"Not so absurd," said Charles Vance, "as what appeared to be the Inspector's last suggestion. He was implying last night that I—I—had murdered my mother."

"Oh, my dear fellow," said Salaman. "Absurd, ridiculous, preposterous, to anyone who knows you. Really, Inspector——"

"Even that," said Bryan, "doesn't seem to me as preposterous as the idea that I should have done it. But perhaps I'm prejudiced."

"Oh, my dear fellow," said Salaman again. "Of course not, I mean nobody could possibly imagine it of you."

"Then of whom," asked Mrs. Rackstraw, "could one imagine it? Of Blossie, of Nevil, of me?"

"No, no, certainly not," cried Salaman. "It is so easy to say that as no one else was in the house one

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

of you—let me say one of *us*, yes, one of *us*—must have done it, but when the question is brought down to individuals, it is of course impossible.”

“Well, you needn’t worry, any of you,” said Bryan. “The Inspector has quite made up his mind, and in a day or two—or perhaps an hour or two—you’ll see a squad of bobbies coming in and me being marched off. Nasty thought.

“But I don’t think it will go much further than that, which is my only comfort. I can’t actually prove that I didn’t do it, but I can make it jolly difficult for anyone to prove that I did.”

“I shan’t make an arrest,” said Cheviot, “till my case is complete. I don’t mind telling you—all of you, and not only Mr. Malcolm—that it is not complete at present. Probably it has only just begun. I have a lot more enquiries to make. And perhaps it would save time if I made some of them now, while I have you all together. I understand that it was on April 2nd that Mrs. Vance’s medicine arrived. Apparently she didn’t take any of it that night. On the 3rd she had three doses, on the 4th three and on the 5th three. On the 6th she refused to take it after breakfast or lunch, but after dinner the essence of almonds was added and she did take it. On the 7th she took it after breakfast and lunch and after dinner she took the dose which killed her. That is correct, isn’t it, Mr. Salaman?”

“I believe so, yes I think that is quite right,” Salaman answered.

“Then,” Cheviot went on, “the dose that killed her was the thirteenth out of twenty-four supplied in the bottle by her doctor. During those five days after the medicine came, she would have taken fifteen

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

doses if she had taken it regularly, but as she twice refused to take it she actually only took thirteen. And if she had taken it regularly, she would have had the thirteenth dose after breakfast on April 7th instead of after dinner that day."

Bryan looked at him admiringly. "That's pretty good, you know, for a chap with a hangover," he said.

"Now," Cheviot continued, pointedly ignoring him, "I want to know more about this bottle of medicine. Apparently Dr. Morgan called and prescribed it. Did you, Mr. Salaman, order it from the chemist's?"

"Oh no. Dr. Morgan does his own dispensing. He said it would be ready on the following day if we could collect it."

"Then who fetched it?" Cheviot demanded.

Bryan said, "Oh Lord! This is the devil." He held up his hand like a schoolboy. "Please, sir, I did, sir," he said.

"Why?" asked Cheviot. "I mean, did you volunteer to go, or were you asked to go?"

"Both, really," said Bryan. "Mr. Salaman asked if anyone was going into Arkington, as the medicine had to be collected, and as I was going on my bicycle I offered to bring it back."

"And why were you going into Arkington?"

"Wanting a change," said Bryan. "There's quite a decent pub there. I don't suppose you've been to the one in Avonbridge, but you can take it from me it's a lousy hole. So I'd thought I would slip over to Arkington on my bicycle, just to get a drink in a decent environment."

"What time was this?" asked Cheviot. "What time did you get back?"

"Well, that's difficult, after a fortnight," Bryan

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

answered. "And for anyone in my position it's important to be accurate, isn't it? Naturally, you will go off this morning to Arkington and find out from Dr. Morgan the time I left him with the bottle of medicine. Then you'll get a bicycle and find how long it takes to get back here, and if that doesn't fit with what I tell you of the time of my arrival you'll conclude that I stopped in a ditch and put cyanide into that bottle. Though I must say," he added, "this doesn't seem to be at all the same as the line you were working on yesterday. I gathered then that I was supposed to have got cyanide from the dark room at four o'clock on April 7th and to have put it into the bottle just after tea. Nothing was said then about April 2nd. So what has happened? Have you got a new clue in the middle of the night, or what?"

"Would you mind answering my question, Mr. Malcolm? What time did you get back with the medicine?"

"Sorry, I'm afraid I can't. I haven't the least idea. I only know that I was pretty late for dinner."

Mrs. Rackstraw said, "We had practically finished. It must have been after eight."

"Some of us actually had finished," said Salaman. "Mrs. Vance and Charles and I had already gone to the common-room."

"That's right," said Nevil. "Joan and I got up a moment or two later and went for a stroll."

"But," said Cheviot, "if dinner was only just finished or not quite finished when Mr. Malcolm returned, there was no reason why Mrs. Vance shouldn't have been given the first dose of her medicine that evening, instead of the next morning."

"Oh," answered Bryan, "I don't mind pleading

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

guilty to that. I was just greedy, with the mitigating circumstance of extreme hunger. I came in here with the bottle in my pocket, Mrs. Vance had gone out of the room and my dinner was waiting for me. So I got right down to my meal and let Mrs. Vance's medicine wait."

"I remember you coming into the common-room just after the nine o'clock news had started," said Salaman. "You began to say something, perhaps you were going to give me the medicine, but the news was very vital, I wouldn't let it be interrupted. Not till we turned it off just before half-past nine. Then you gave me the bottle. I asked Mrs. Vance to take a dose, but she looked at the label and said it was to be taken after meals and she considered half-past nine much too late."

"What was done with the bottle?" Cheviot asked.

"It was put on the corner of the mantelpiece in the common-room. It was always kept there," Salaman explained. "But I'm afraid I don't see—I was under the impression, at least it was certainly suggested by Superintendent Lanfier, that the cyanide would not have been put into the medicine if I had not provided the covering smell of almonds with the essence. I did not do that till April 6th. So it is difficult to see what these events on April 2nd have to do with the matter."

"It may be difficult for you, Mr. Salaman," Cheviot retorted, "but it is quite clear to Mrs. Vance's murderer. If the essence had not been added, he might not have used cyanide; but some poison would certainly have been put into the medicine. That is why I am more interested now in the medicine than in the cyanide."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"You were interested enough in the cyanide yesterday," cried Nevil.

"If I've got this right," said Bryan, "you mean that someone decided to murder her before April 6th, in fact as long ago as April 2nd. But that is earlier than that little business which you said was my motive. So I'm let out after all. By jove! Then you won't come hunting me any more."

Salaman said, "Bryan, will you please be silent for a minute. If the murder was planned before I produced the essence, that action of mine which was meant to be so helpful can have had nothing directly to do with poor Mrs. Vance's death? Is not that so? Really, a tremendous relief, I have felt so guilty, so upset——"

"You haven't felt half so much upset over feeling guilty as I have done over feeling innocent," cried Bryan.

Ignoring this back-chat Cheviot pushed on with his case.

"Did more than one person have an opportunity," he demanded, "to touch that medicine bottle—perhaps to have it for five minutes without being noticed—before Mrs. Vance took the first dose? It will save a lot of time if that is made clear."

"Oh, that's easy," said Bryan. "We were all in here till we started drifting off to bed. I went at half-past ten, so I don't know what happened here after that, but if things were the same as usual everyone would have gone by eleven and then Mr. Salaman would have started round the building looking for fires and burglars. That is usually a ten-minute job, isn't it, Mr. Salaman? And I suppose at that time anyone could have come back and gone into the common-room."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Thank you very much, Mr. Malcolm," said Cheviot. "And is there anyone in a position to prove that he or she did not come back then?"

That caused a good deal of alarm. Or at any rate a lot of vigorous protestations. But when Cheviot had sorted them out it was clear that nobody had an alibi for that time, if that was what he wanted. Charles Vance was particularly indignant that any proof could be wanted in his case, and Miss Bloss nearly became hysterical in the apparent conviction that anyone who didn't produce an alibi was certain to be arrested. Bryan said, "If my wife had been at home I'd have been the one safe man. As she wasn't, it's a damned good job for me that I've been counted out: the Inspector has a way of picking on me, you know, whenever my circumstances are exactly the same as everyone else's."

If I had been Cheviot and running his peculiar case, I should have let that pass. But he rose to it at once. "I didn't say you were counted out, Mr. Malcolm," he declared. "You certainly are not."

"Oh, good Lord!" cried Bryan. "Then there'll be no peace for me."

"The point I have now established," Cheviot went on, "is that any one of you people, and not only the murderer, could have handled the medicine bottle before Mrs. Vance took her first dose. The murderer must have known that that would be the position. Therefore that would have been a perfectly safe time for him to have added the poison, so that Mrs. Vance died on the following morning. But he didn't do that: the poison was not added till five days later."

Mrs. Rackstraw said, "Thank heaven, at any rate, that you are treating this case in a logical manner!

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

I suppose it follows that the murderer either hadn't got the poison then or that he didn't want to use it then."

"Exactly," said Cheviot. "But as I know that he had decided by then that Mrs. Vance was to die, I think it most unlikely that the poison wasn't ready. Therefore I am forced to the conclusion that the murderer had decided to kill her and was ready to do so, but for some reason he deliberately refrained from doing it till five days later."

This was greeted with silence by everyone except Miss Bloss, who giggled violently and said, "I don't think my nerves will stand much more." After a minute, Bryan said, "Now we are getting at it. I suppose you really are still running for me, aren't you, Inspector? Well, have it your own way, don't mind me. Anyhow, I gather that your new point is that as I had made up my mind to poison Mrs. Vance—for some quite unknown reason, by the way—by putting something, not necessarily cyanide, into her medicine, of course I had a perfect chance to do the dirty work on the way back from the doctor's. But I wouldn't, you say, have done that because if she had taken a dose directly I got in, and had gone off dead, everybody would have pointed at me. So I had to wait, you say, till plenty of other people had had a chance of getting at the bottle as well as myself. Well, that's reasonable, I suppose, granted your false premises at the start. But I don't see, any more than you seem to do, why I should have waited four days, or whatever the time was. Once the road was clear, and other people stood a chance of being implicated, I'd have gone ahead at once, wouldn't I? I was often in the common-room, and I don't mind admitting that

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

like everyone else I was occasionally there alone. So why on earth did I wait all that time? It sounds crackers to me."

"I really don't see," said Mrs. Rackstraw, "that anyone can be suspected merely on opportunity. Surely a murderer must have a motive?"

"Ah, that's the great point," said Bryan. "Some of the best detectives have certainly held that view, but I gather from Inspector Burmann that he regards it as quite redundant—at any rate with anyone so obviously guilty as he thinks I am."

CHAPTER TEN

As the clock in the hall struck a quarter past nine Cheviot said, "I shall now go to the common-room again and send for anybody I want to interview. In the first place, Mr. Salaman, I should like another word with you."

"Now," he continued in the common-room a few minutes later, "you will appreciate why I am more interested than I was yesterday in Mrs. Malcolm's holiday. The only unusual event I know of that was timed to happen on April 7th was her return, so I want to see whether that ties up at all with the murderer's fixed date for his crime."

"I don't see what connection there could be," said Salaman.

"You say she got back at noon," Cheviot went on, "about eight hours before Mrs. Vance's death. But this isn't a question of what actually happened, so much as of what the murderer counted on as likely to happen. If Mrs. Vance had not refused two doses of her medicine, she would obviously have reached the poisoned thirteenth dose two meals earlier than she did: that is to say, she would have died after breakfast on the 7th instead of after dinner. Then her death would have come four hours *before* Mrs. Malcolm returned. It seems to me it is quite likely that that is what the murderer was counting on. Now, was the time of Mrs. Malcolm's return fixed in advance and known to—everyone?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Oh yes. She told us before she left that she would be catching the 9.50 from town on the 7th, it's the best morning train and gets people here comfortably in time for lunch. But I must say, Inspector, that I don't think your argument is sound. Of course no one could have *known* that Mrs. Vance would refuse her medicine but it was a thing she almost invariably did. I mean I don't think she ever took medicine regularly according to the directions, she always refused some of the doses."

"Oh," said Cheviot. "You mean everyone knew that?"

"Oh yes. At least, all of us who have been here any length of time. You may find that Nevil Church did not know it, but certainly everyone else would have done."

"I see," said Cheviot thoughtfully, and apparently more to himself than to Salaman. "I suppose the meaning of that is that she might have refused it half a dozen times in as many days, whereas in fact she only did so twice. So no one could possibly have estimated in advance when she would reach the thirteenth dose. That's rather a snag. H'm. Look here, Mr. Salaman. You told me it was after breakfast on the fourth day—that would have been April 6th—that Mrs. Vance first refused to take her medicine. What exactly happened then?"

"She didn't refuse," Salaman explained, "she simply got up from the table as if she hadn't seen it."

"But," Cheviot objected, "I thought the bottle was kept in here, not in the dining-room?"

"Dear me, yes, that's true," said Salaman. "But it was certainly there that morning, somebody must have

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

brought it in. Perhaps Charles did, because I remember that she needed a little reminding and persuading the night before and I suppose he thought it would be easier to get her to take it after breakfast when we were all there to join in the persuasion."

"I see. And what happened when she got up without seeing it?"

"Charles picked it up and spoke to her. She said, 'Oh yes, I quite forgot.' But of course I am sure she had only pretended to forget, she had those childish ways at times. Charles wanted to pour out a dose for her, but she said no, she wouldn't have it then. Bryan said, 'Oh, you really should, Mrs. Vance,' or something like that, but she said no, again, and went out of the room."

"And after lunch? Was it still in the dining-room?"

"No, it was certainly here again then. That time she complained of the bitter taste. Several of us tried to persuade her, I can't remember who exactly."

"And," suggested Cheviot, "who first suggested that something should be added to disguise the taste?"

Salaman looked at him sharply. "I told you," he said, "that that was my own unfortunate inspiration."

"But inspirations don't usually come entirely out of the blue," said Cheviot. "There might naturally have been some discussion about the bitter taste——"

"Ah. Now you remind me, that was so. Yes, of course. Joan had suggested 'something to take the taste away.' Young Nevil said that medicine that did you good always tasted nasty. Mrs. Rackstraw said that that wasn't so in modern medicine and that good doctors added a nice flavouring. Oh yes, and Bryan said, 'Well, Morgan doesn't seem to have done it to

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

this one: a bit of a pity he didn't, if that's the only objection to the stuff.' "

"That's interesting," said Cheviot. "All right, Mr. Salaman. You might ask Mr. Vance to spare me a minute."

When Charles came in, he said rather aggressively to Cheviot, "I'm glad you didn't keep me waiting any longer. I tell you frankly, I haven't liked your attitude lately. I want to have things out——"

"Presently, by all means, Mr. Vance," said Cheviot. "But first there is something rather urgent. I understand that your mother first required persuading to take her medicine after dinner on April 5th. That prompted you to take the bottle into the dining-room, so as to make sure she took it after breakfast. Was that entirely your own idea?"

"Oh, I'll take full responsibility for that," he answered. "You see, Dr. Morgan had impressed on me that I must see my mother took the medicine regularly, and knowing her ways I saw danger ahead that evening. I wanted the others to back me up after breakfast——"

"Did you ask them to, beforehand?"

"I had a word with Bryan about it. He said he'd help, of course—in fact it was he who suggested producing it on the breakfast-table instead of when she and I came in here."

"Then it wasn't your own idea?"

"Well, no," said Charles, "I suppose it wasn't."

"And," Cheviot persisted, "I don't suppose that was the first time you had told Mr. Malcolm about the doctor's instructions?"

"No. He knew I was determined to see she took the doses regularly."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"So that if he had enough confidence in your power of persuading your mother, he could have counted on her not missing out any doses?"

"Oh yes. In fact I remember his saying, just after the doctor had been, that my mother wouldn't be able to 'dodge her dosing'—that was his phrase—this time."

"Then," said Cheviot, "he probably showed concern when she did dodge it on April 6th."

"I know what you are getting at," said Charles. "It's a perfectly loathsome idea, as I told you yesterday. But all these points, one after another, seem to confirm it. Of course I didn't know till you explained things at breakfast, just now, that there was this idea of my mother having to die at a particular time—and for that matter I still don't see what that can possibly mean. But if you are right about that and if you mean that the murderer—well, Bryan, damn it—wanted her to reach the thirteenth dose at a particular time, then it is true that Bryan did keep egging me on to see that she didn't leave out a dose. Of course I didn't suspect anything—how could I?—but looking back at it now, I can see that things that looked like ordinary, decent helpfulness were just a part of his beastly plan. And if it comes to that, it was really Bryan who suggested putting in the essence of almonds. Not in so many words, of course, but one day when Joan and Nevil and Mrs. Rack were arguing about doctors Bryan said something about putting flavourings into medicine and there not being anything of that sort in my mother's—of course he must have meant that to give someone the idea of adding something, and I suppose he was no end pleased when Salaman took it up. You know, this

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

is the most ghastly thing. I'd have trusted Bryan with anything I had. I thought he was the best pal in the world. And all the time—at any rate all those last few days—he didn't do anything or say anything that wasn't part of this diabolical scheme to enable him to kill my mother. I can hardly believe it, even now. I don't want to believe it. It is absolutely hateful. In fact I'll tell you now, though it may seem pretty odd to you, that when you seemed to be starting to suspect *me*, last night and this morning, though I felt pretty indignant about it, there was a bit of me that was really *glad*. I felt it must mean that after all you weren't absolutely sure about Bryan. Heaven knows it is pretty distasteful to have you chucking out hints that I could conceivably have killed her, but apart from that I would rather it was anyone in the world except Bryan."

After Charles had gone, Cheviot turned to me with a face that was positively beaming. "We're collecting useful evidence, Ross," he said. "The answer to every question I ask is—'Bryan Malcolm.'"

"The answer to every question," I retorted, "is that the things you are asking about—all of them—could have been done by several people."

Cheviot said, "Ah, you are missing the point. As you say, each of these things could have been done by several people, or actually was done by several people together. You can take the trouble, if you like, to tabulate a list of them: the people who could have tampered with the medicine when it arrived, those who could have got at the cyanide on the afternoon of the murder, those who had an opportunity to put it into the medicine, and then those who tried to get Mrs. Vance to take her medicine regularly and

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

so keep to date with it, and those who prompted Salaman to suggest putting in a flavouring. What you'll find is that some names appear on one list but not on others—but Bryan Malcolm's name is there every time."

"Oh," I said. "Well, that's just chance. And it is also because you are asking questions designed to get a particular answer. You are convinced that Bryan is the murderer. I just don't see that you've any reason for that. I don't believe he did it."

"The mistake you are making," said Cheviot, "is to let yourself be governed by prejudice. Actually, you haven't any opinion one way or the other. But you are young enough to want to be independent and original. You think it will look well to show you've got ideas of your own and that you aren't just a yes man to me. So because I say it is Bryan Malcolm, you say it isn't. That's all there is in your opinions, Ross: just sheer prejudice."

That, of course, was Cheviot at his worst. It was also the level to which I had expected him to sink as his mad fit progressed. But as one should never argue with lunatics, I let the wave flow over me and said nothing. Cheviot apparently took this as a good sign and felt that he had put me in my place.

So he said in a self-satisfied tone, "All right. Now, perhaps we can get ahead. The implication of what we've just been told is that as Bryan arranged for Salaman to get essence from the kitchen, he must have known there was some there. In that case he had probably seen to it that Salaman shouldn't find anything except the one with the smell of almonds. That's worth looking into. Come along. We'll see what we can learn in the kitchen."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

A woman whom we had not seen before was washing the breakfast things at the sink: no doubt she was one of the village women who came in for the mornings. At the table, Mrs. Malcolm was weighing out portions of margarine and putting them in little dishes, each of which was surmounted by a small paper flag bearing a person's name.

Cheviot came straight to his point. Going up to Mrs. Malcolm he asked where the essence of almonds had been kept. She nodded towards the dresser. "Second shelf down, in the right-hand corner." She did not look up from her work.

"There's none there now," he said. "Was there more than one bottle when you went for your holiday?"

"I left three bottles," she answered. "Lemon, almond and cloves. I don't know where they've all got to. Of course the police went off with the almonds, but the other two must have been used up while I was away. About half our stores went. Those girls are most extravagant."

"Some people have heavy hands in cooking," remarked Cheviot. "But it doesn't follow that that is why these essences disappeared." He walked over to the woman at the sink. "Is it one of your jobs to tidy the dresser?" he demanded. "Then, can you remember the three little bottles which were in the corner of the second shelf at the beginning of the week before last? I think two of them suddenly disappeared one day. What I want to know is which day that was. I wonder if you can help me?"

"Well, sir," the woman answered, "there's not much difference between one day and the next in a

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

job like this, particularly in the week before last."

"I suppose not," said Cheviot. "But you do remember them disappearing, both in one day?"

"Oh yes, I remember. And I told Miss Salaman, who was doing the work that day, Mrs. Malcolm being away. They were all three there one morning, and the next there was only one."

"Thank you," said Cheviot. He turned to me. "Not much chance of getting it closer than that," he said, "but it's good enough." Then he went up to Mrs. Malcolm. "May I trouble you to come into the common-room?" he suggested

Her expression implied that she thought his enquiry much less important than the weighing of margarine. But she took a different line when we were in the common-room and the door was shut.

"As a matter of fact, Inspector," she cried, "I very much wanted to see you alone. Oh, I don't mind your sergeant being present: in fact it is just as well that he too should hear what I am going to say. I have to keep up appearances with you in the kitchen, in front of Mrs. Smithson, or else there would be much too much gossip in the village. But here it is different and I can say what I feel. I just want to know why you are treating my husband like you are doing."

Cheviot didn't seem to want to face up to that "Am I treating him in any special way?" he demanded.

"In a very cruel way," she retorted. "You seem to have made up your mind that he murdered Mrs. Vance. But he didn't, he certainly didn't."

"How do you know he didn't?"

"I've been married to him for twenty-two years,"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

she answered. "That's why I know. I am quite aware of his faults," she went on. "It doesn't surprise me in the least to see him being evasive and to hear him telling lies to you. He does that kind of thing quite naturally, he always has done. I suppose it makes you suspicious of him, but it doesn't mean what you think. It is just a habit. He tells lies more easily than he tells the truth. And when he tells the truth he does it in a way that would make anyone who didn't know him think he was lying. You have to have lived with him a long time to understand all that."

"It must make life very difficult," Cheviot murmured.

"He told you the truth yesterday afternoon," she insisted.

"Only after telling a good many lies, and because he was forced to," said Cheviot. "And even then I am not at all sure that all of it was the truth."

"I am not saying that he couldn't commit a crime if he wanted to," she declared. "I sometimes think he could. But not murder. He couldn't kill anyone. And least of all in that way, by planning and plotting to do it by poison. He hasn't the courage."

"The amount of courage required," Cheviot suggested, "would depend on the urgency. In fact, on the motive."

She hardly seemed to be listening to his comments. "Haven't you realized," she cried, "that people who are always talking and boasting don't do desperate things? Bryan couldn't do anything desperate. He might think of himself as doing it, if he wanted to; he might even work out a way of doing it. But that is as far as he would get. Even if you can imagine

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

him wanting—well, to kill someone, he would never get beyond making a lot of plans. He would never find enough courage to go on with it. He hasn't the—the backbone to do anything really terrible. You see," she went on, "I am being very frank, Inspector. But I do know Bryan, I really do. It is just because of his lack of what I call backbone that I trust him."

"I see," said Cheviot. "And while saying all this, Mrs. Malcolm, you admit that you don't regard it as inconceivable that he could not only have murderous thoughts against a particular person, but could get as far as working out in detail a plan for murder?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that he did that about Mrs. Vance," she cried. "He would never have done that. He was very fond of her."

"I see," said Cheviot again. "But if you were mistaken about him being so fond of her, it wouldn't be unthinkable that he could want and plan to murder her?"

"No, no, no, I didn't say that." She turned excitedly to me. "I didn't, did I?" she cried.

"Well, never mind," said Cheviot, before I could think how to deal with that situation. "Now tell me something about yourself. You came back from your holiday on April 7th and reached here about noon. What did you do when you arrived here?"

"I went to my flat and began to unpack. My husband joined me——"

"You expected that, I suppose?"

"Naturally," she answered, "he came to welcome me home."

"And," asked Cheviot, with his dangerous smoothness, "would you also apply the word 'naturally' to

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

the fact that he immediately started a quarrel with you?"

She looked at him sharply. "I might almost answer 'Yes' to that," she said, "if I was sure you wouldn't twist its meaning or deliberately misunderstand me. You did that just now, so I don't know where I am with you. So I'm not saying 'Yes' and I'm not saying 'No.' I think it will be better if we keep to facts. Bryan and I do quarrel, quite a lot. You must have been told that already, because I think everyone knows it, in spite of my efforts to keep up appearances."

"Yes, I have heard of it," said Cheviot. "What was this particular quarrel about?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "What kind of thing are quarrels about? Differences of points of view——"

Cheviot suddenly became very severe. "I thought a moment ago, Mrs. Malcolm, that we were going to get somewhere with you. But we shan't if you behave like this. I thought you realized that your husband was in great danger of being arrested for murder. That being so, things are too serious for evasions. I've got to know the truth. What was this quarrel about?"

"I didn't like my husband being so very casual," she explained. "He came into my room and said 'Oh, hullo, you're back,' just like that. It wasn't much of a welcome, after I had been away a fortnight. He didn't even seem glad to see me. If he had been a little more enthusiastic I might have let things pass, but as he was like that I reminded him that he was to have met me at the station. He said, 'Sorry, too busy, couldn't get away. And anyhow if

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

I had come it would only have been to act as a porter without getting a tip, so it wasn't worth while.' Naturally, I was very angry."

"In fact there was a blazing row?"

"He didn't like what I said, and he was extremely rude. He stood and stormed at me."

"And then," suggested Cheviot, "I expect you got a bad headache and stayed in your room?"

"I didn't feel at all like joining everybody at lunch," she explained, "and as it had been arranged that I shouldn't come on duty again till teatime, I took some aspirin and stayed here till half-past three. Then I went down to the kitchen and——"

"One moment," said Cheviot. "I suppose someone had been doing your work in your absence?"

"Mrs. Rackstraw, Miss Salaman and Miss Bloss shared it between them, taking it in turns for a day each. Mrs. Rackstraw was doing it on that last day, until after the washing-up of the lunch things."

"I am told she was the first person down to tea," said Cheviot. "I wonder if that means that she came down early to help you, or in case you weren't there to get it?"

"Yes. She came to the kitchen at twenty minutes to four. She seemed surprised to see me. Bryan had apparently told her at lunch that I wouldn't be coming down."

"Oh, had he? Guess-work on his part, or had you told him you wouldn't get the tea?"

"I didn't say anything to him about it. I suppose he knew how I should feel after the way he had treated me, and assumed—— But he ought to have known that I wouldn't leave other people to do my work."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Cheviot conjured up a suitable expression of understanding. "Plucky of you to come down with a raging headache," he said. "Now, one last question. Why was your husband so emphatic over refusing to tell me the cause of the quarrel?"

"I don't suppose he would have minded if I hadn't been there when you asked him. He's like that. If he could have given you his own version without fear of contradiction, he would have enjoyed talking about it. But he wouldn't do that in front of me. As I said just now, he is rather a coward." She looked up almost appealingly at Cheviot. "You see, Inspector, I am telling you all about him. I'm not trying to make him out any better than he is. But I don't want you to think him worse than he is. And you mustn't think he could have murdered Mrs. Vance. He couldn't possibly, not possibly."

When she had gone, Cheviot turned to me, looking as cynical as I had ever seen him look. "The ogress turning almost human," he said. "In fact, quite human and almost feminine. I wonder why. And the obvious answer to that, of course, is that she knows that her husband is guilty, and that I know it too, and therefore uses a woman's wiles to shake my certainty. She's too clever to think I'll be influenced by hearing that she has blind faith in him, so she admits that he's a foul beast but claims that he hasn't the guts to do a murder. Well, well, well. Quite smart tactics, of course, but she didn't see that it let her in for giving me quite a lot of useful information."

I said, "Did it strike you that even if her husband is a coward and a creature without backbone, she certainly isn't anything of the sort? If she wanted to

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

do a murder, by poison or any other method, she'd go right on with it, without any sort of scruples."

"Oh, I daresay she would," said Cheviot. "But for goodness sake don't start that red-herring. One murderer in the Malcolm family is quite enough."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHEVIOT went striding along the corridor, with me behind him as usual. He stopped when he came to Salaman's door, knocked quickly and went in.

"I shan't keep you one minute," he said. "Just a single question. Was Mr. Malcolm particularly busy on Tuesday morning, the day Mrs. Vance died?"

"Then? No," answered Salaman. "Not on that Tuesday. Normally, it's a very busy day, we have a conference every Tuesday morning, Bryan, Charles, Joan and I. A board meeting, if you like to give it that name, with Bryan attending although he is not yet a director. But on that particular Tuesday there wasn't anything very urgent and so I cancelled the meeting because I thought Bryan would want to go down to the station to meet his wife."

"I see," said Cheviot. "And apart from that meeting, would he have been specially busy?"

"Quite the contrary," said Salaman. "We always keep Tuesday mornings as free from routine work as possible, so that we four can give our minds to questions of policy."

We went on then to Bryan's room. He was examining colour prints through a magnifying glass. "Oh Lord!" he cried. "The Inquisition again. Well, sit down and get on with it."

"I prefer to stand," said Cheviot. "Yesterday, Mr. Malcolm, you refused to tell me what you and your wife quarrelled about on the day Mrs. Vance died.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

I am hoping you have now thought better of that."

"By which you mean, I suppose," said Bryan, "that what I wouldn't say in front of her you expect me to be quite willing to say when we are alone. You've a nice opinion of me, haven't you?"

"I thought it might have occurred to you," Cheviot retorted, "that by this time I would have obtained her version of the affair, so that you would want to get your own in as soon as possible."

"Oh," said Bryan, "that's the idea, is it? And what did she say?"

"That you were entirely in the wrong."

"Did she, by jove? Just like that, I suppose. And nothing about her jumping at me like a wild cat when I had hardly had time to say how glad I was to see her."

"She seemed to think it was a pity you hadn't come to say all that at the station."

"How the devil could I?" cried Bryan. "I can't get away from work any time I want to. I've got my living to get. I was up to my eyes that morning——"

"Mr. Malcolm," said Cheviot, "I gave you the official warning yesterday afternoon, and I'll be glad if you will remember that it still applies. I have one or two points to put to you. The first is that as Mr. Salaman cancelled the usual Tuesday morning meeting, you could quite well have gone to meet your wife if you had wished to do so."

"Oh," said Bryan. "And are you here to investigate a murder or are you merely trying to make trouble between me and my wife? Of all the damned cheek! What the hell has it got to do with you whether I think it worth while to go and meet my wife or not?"

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Furthermore," Cheviot continued, "I suggest that you deliberately refrained from doing so and equally deliberately gave your wife the most casual of greetings when she returned, in order to pick a quarrel with her. I think you wanted to make sure she stayed in her own room for several hours after she returned."

"Don't be a fool," cried Bryan. "Why should I have minded which room she stayed in?"

"I suggest," said Cheviot, "that you wanted to make sure that she had no opportunity to be alone with Mrs. Vance before Mrs. Vance died."

"Oh, my God!" said Bryan. "That's pretty nasty, you know. You might as well accuse me straight out of having killed Mrs. Vance. In fact I think you are doing that. Because if I've got you right you are implying that I knew when she was going to die, which I couldn't have done unless I had been going to kill her myself. Well? Is that what you mean?"

"I'd like to hear your answers," said Cheviot, "to those suggestions."

"Oh, they are just suggestions, are they? Not definite accusations? In other words, you aren't as sure of yourself as you want me to think you are. Bluffing, are you, eh? All right, I call you. If you think you've got proofs to back up your 'suggestions' just trot them out. Then when I know what you are getting at—the whole thing and not just bits, like these—I'll tell you what my answers are. Though all the same," he went on, after a second's pause, "I suppose I had better answer this one straight away, because it is just too plain absurd. You say I picked a quarrel with my wife so that she should stay in her room and not be alone with Mrs. Vance! Well, that is sheer nonsense. My wife did have a headache

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

that afternoon, I believe—though I expect it was chiefly the effect of the railway journey—but it certainly didn't prevent her being with Mrs. Vance. She came down to tea."

"I know she did," said Cheviot. "But I also know that that surprised you. At lunch you told Mrs. Rackstraw that she would not be getting the tea."

"And what of that?" Bryan retorted. "I knew she was tired after the journey—she wouldn't have got into that nervy state with me if she hadn't been. Of course I expected her to lunch, but when she didn't appear, it was obvious that she was going to give the meal a miss. That made it seem likely that she wouldn't be down to tea either. Then we shouldn't any of us have got any tea unless Mrs. Rack had done the work in her place. So naturally I gave Mrs. Rack a hint. It wasn't necessary, as things turned out, but I couldn't know that."

"You didn't go and ask your wife if she was coming down to lunch," Cheviot suggested. "Neither did you ask her whether she would be doing the tea."

"No, I didn't. Frankly, I thought it best to keep out of her way till she had got over her bad temper. You know, the trouble with you, Inspector, is that you don't take normal human reactions into account. Your psychology is all wrong. If a chap has a quarrel with his wife, you expect him to behave immediately afterwards exactly as if nothing of the sort had happened. Anyhow, I've cleared that point, because the answer was so completely obvious. But as I said just now, I'm not going to deal with your suggestions one by one. If you trot out the lot, I'll give you my answers. But that is the most I'm going to do for you."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Cheviot sat in silence for a minute. Then he said, "I'm under no compulsion to tell you anything, Mr. Malcolm. My job is to ask questions, not to answer them. But for all that I will tell you what I've got against you so far. You needn't imagine I am doing it because you want to hear it: quite frankly, I want to know how you'll react to it—whether it will lead you to tell more lies or to tell the truth, or a bit of each. And if when you've heard it you refuse to say anything at all, that will tell me just as much. So it will be useful to me in any case.

"Now, these are the points I've got against you. On April 2nd you fetched Mrs. Vance's medicine. Though you knew the doctor wanted her to start taking it as soon as possible, you carried it in your pocket till it was too late for her to have a dose that evening."

"Nothing very criminal about that, surely?" Bryan remarked.

Cheviot ignored the interruption. "The bottle," he continued, "thus remained intact—or apparently intact—until breakfast time on the following morning, by which time several other people as well as yourself had had the opportunity of tampering with it. By then you, I suggest, had not merely had the opportunity but had taken the first step towards murdering Mrs. Vance. Then you waited——"

Bryan again interrupted him. "I do wish you'd stop this silly habit of behaving like a perfect fool," he said. "If I killed Mrs. Vance, as you seem to imagine, I'll know what you mean by 'taken the first step,' so there's no sense in being cryptic about it. On the other hand, if I'm innocent there's no harm in telling me what you're talking about. In either case it is just nonsense to pretend to me that you've got a vital secret which

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

can only be referred to in a roundabout way and a hushed voice. And as I say, doing that kind of thing makes you look such an awful ass."

"Oh, very well, Mr. Malcolm," answered Cheviot. "I suggest that you had secured a second bottle, exactly similar to the one you fetched from Dr. Morgan's and with a similar label. Some time on the night of April 2nd, or possibly early the next morning, you poured half the medicine into the second bottle, filling it up with water. Then you substituted that bottle for the original one."

"Seems a silly thing to do," said Bryan. "Should I have gained anything—if I had wanted to murder her, I mean—by getting her to drink medicine and water instead of medicine neat?"

Again Cheviot ignored him.

"With that essential preparation safely made," he continued, "you waited till the time arrived when you wanted Mrs. Vance to die. I admit that I am not yet absolutely clear about this, but the suggestion I made to you just now was that you were determined she should die before she had a chance of talking to your wife, after Mrs. Malcolm got back from her holiday. You knew, of course, when your wife would return and you had calculated that by that time Mrs. Vance would have taken twelve doses of medicine, so that the level of the medicine in the bottle would be on the half-way mark. The medicine in the bottle you had hidden was also up to the half-way mark, so there would be no apparent difference between the two bottles when you substituted one for the other. But the essential thing was that Mrs. Vance should take twelve doses before your wife's return. You knew, of course, that she wasn't good at

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

taking medicine regularly, so you were very watchful to see that she didn't miss any doses this time. You spoke to Charles Vance about that, urging him to see that the medicine was taken regularly. After dinner on the 5th, Mrs. Vance didn't seem to want to take the medicine, so you suggested to Charles that it should be moved into the dining-room so that you could help him to persuade her to take the next dose, which otherwise would have been taken or refused while he was alone with her in the common-room after breakfast. In fact you did everything you could to get that medicine taken regularly. But in spite of your efforts Mrs. Vance did miss out two doses. She would probably have missed others as well, but for the addition of the flavouring. You realized that the addition of a certain flavouring could help your plan in another way as well. So you first of all went into the kitchen when no one was about, and found that there were three bottles of essence on the dresser—lemon, cloves and almond. You removed the cloves and the lemon, then you planted in Mr. Salaman's mind the idea of adding a flavouring—knowing that when he went to look for one he was bound to produce the essence of almonds. Up to that time, you had not intended to use cyanide for this murder, because though it was easily accessible it had a smell which you couldn't disguise. But when the essence of almonds had been added cyanide was the obvious poison for you."

He broke off and waited as if he expected a challenge. But Bryan only said, "Do go on, Inspector. This imaginative effort is what they call a *tour de force*, isn't it? As a matter of fact I'm frightfully impressed: the way you've mixed pieces of sheer inven-

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

tion like that kitchen story with bits of truth twisted to mean something they never meant is just marvelous. That—my admiration for it all, I mean—is why I've stopped interrupting even when it becomes fantastically absurd. Instead, I've been taking notes, so that I can deal with it later, point by point. You don't mind my doing that, do you?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"MRS. VANCE'S failure to take two doses of her medicine," Cheviot went on, "meant that she could not reach the thirteenth dose—that is to say, the one past the half-way line in the bottle—till after dinner on April 7th, some eight hours after your wife returned. You therefore picked a quarrel with your wife, reducing her, I imagine, to tears, so that she remained in her own room all the afternoon. She did not come to the main building till it was time to prepare the supper, and she only saw Mrs. Vance at that meal in the presence of all the other people. By that time you had taken cyanide from the dark room just before tea, when you were pretending to be at work in your own room, and you had poured a large dose of it into the duplicate medicine bottle. Then after tea, when Mrs. Vance left you alone in the common-room, you substituted that poisoned bottle for the other one. Then, of course, there was no more for you to do."

Bryan suddenly said, "Look here, I didn't mean to interrupt, but this isn't clear to my second-rate intelligence. Why am I supposed to have done all this hocus-pocus and sleight-of-hand with bottles? Wouldn't it have been far easier just to have dropped cyanide crystals down the neck of the bottle of medicine?"

"As things turned out, it would have been just as easy," Cheviot answered. "But you couldn't count

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

on being left alone in the room at exactly the moment when you wanted to be alone there. If Mrs. Vance or anyone else had remained in the room you could have put one bottle into your pocket and have put the other in its place on the mantelpiece, within a fraction of a second, with your body hiding what your hands were doing. It would have been a much longer and more difficult operation to uncork the bottle, drop crystals down the narrow neck, re-cork the bottle, and pick up any spilt crystals. But the ease or difficulty of the operation wasn't the reason why this method was chosen. I suggest, Mr. Malcolm, that you decided on a substitute bottle because the poison you first proposed to use had one property in common with cyanide: it wouldn't very easily and immediately dissolve."

Bryan looked at him intently. "You know," he said, "this business of answering your suggestions and accusations isn't going to be as easy as I thought. You're pretty damned sharp and you're no novice at this kind of thing, I suppose. And you are ready, as you've shown all along, to twist the simplest and most innocent actions into evidence of criminal intentions. I'm beginning to think that I haven't been taking you seriously enough. I didn't because I just couldn't believe that anyone could really regard me as a murderer: it seemed certain that within a minute or two you would see what utter nonsense you were thinking and would come and apologize for having such beastly ideas about me. But you aren't doing that or anything of the sort. On the contrary, you've worked out this colossal case against me in every detail—the fact that all the details are wrong doesn't seem to worry you—and I've got the impression that you

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

aren't easily going to be shaken off it. Just for one bright moment I thought I had you completely with a question just now: but not a bit of it—you only showed me that you had gone much more deeply into things than I had imagined. And that is what is now putting the wind up me: this idea that you really do mean it and that you really think you've a case against me. And more than that, hang it all, that you don't merely think you've a case, like someone working out moves in a game of chess, but that you quite seriously believe that I killed Mrs. Vance."

"Anyway," Cheviot returned, "you haven't said anything yet to induce me not to believe that."

"I was waiting for you to finish. You've told me what you think I did and how I am supposed to have done it: what about *why* I did it? What is this precious secret that I apparently didn't want Mrs. Vance to learn from my wife?"

"It is more likely something you didn't want your wife to learn from Mrs. Vance," said Cheviot. "But I admit that that is the gap in my case. If I knew your motive, Mr. Malcolm, I should arrest you at once."

"Then thank goodness you don't," he answered. "At any rate you seem to be admitting that the motive—alleged motive, I suppose we ought to call it—which you were working on yesterday doesn't apply. That's something. All you've got against me is some very circumstantial so-called evidence."

"Which I am giving you a chance to rebut," said Cheviot.

"Yes, with a warning that anything I say will be used against me and not considered in my favour; and that if I don't say anything, that will be used

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

against me too! That's British justice, apparently, as interpreted by Scotland Yard. Still, I'll play up and see if I can't convince even you that you've got absolutely nothing against me. In the first place, it is an essential part of your case that this murder was planned as early as April 2nd, and you admit that at that time I had no known motive for killing her. I should have thought that that alone settled the matter. But as you don't agree, I'll take your other points—your 'circumstantial evidence.' Admittedly I fetched the medicine and didn't hand it over till half-past nine. You say that shows a criminal purpose because I knew the importance of Mrs. Vance starting on it as soon as possible. But of course if I hadn't volunteered to fetch it that evening it would not have arrived till the following day and she wouldn't have had the first dose till lunch-time at the earliest. My failure to produce the medicine directly I arrived put her one dose back, but my having fetched it at all put her one dose forward; and I should say those two things cancel each other out.

"And incidentally," he went on, "your whole idea seems to be that I wanted her to reach a particular dose at a particular time, and that I knew she might jib at it and upset my time-table by missing a dose or two. In that case, perhaps you can tell me why I didn't take the precaution of getting a dose in hand, so to speak, by producing the bottle directly I arrived, so that she started taking it that night instead of the following morning. Any answer to that?"

"Go on," said Cheviot.

"Oh, all right. I daresay you'll need to think that one out. Well, then there is this second-bottle business. You slide very quickly over the question of

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

where I got a second bottle with an identical label. You'll remember that this medicine was to be taken in teaspoon doses, which is rather unusual: you haven't taken the trouble to show where I could have found a bottle with that unusual label, with Mrs. Vance's name written on it in Dr. Morgan's writing."

"I haven't had time for that," said Cheviot. "That kind of evidence is required when a case comes into court, not for an arrest."

"Oh. I wish I was allowed to slip round difficulties like that, but apparently that's a privilege only allowed to the police."

Bryan looked down at his notes and then up again at Cheviot. "I don't see that my next point helps me a lot," he said, "but it busts one of your main arguments, which is all to the good. As I see it, you've calculated that I had to do this substitution of bottles directly after Mrs. Vance had taken twelve doses, because her bottle would then be half empty and the one I had was also half empty. I just don't see that. If her bottle had been three-quarters empty, I could have poured away half of the medicine in my bottle, so as to bring the level down to the same point; and if it had been only one-quarter empty—that is, when she had only taken six doses—I could have brought mine up to that level by adding water, as I am alleged to have done with her bottle. So all your argument about a fixed date for the murder seems to go haywire."

"Oh, not a bit of it," Cheviot retorted. "You certainly could not add water to your bottle because you knew that after the murder that would be analysed and you wanted it to appear to be the original bottle

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

of medicine as supplied by Dr. Morgan. And you couldn't let Mrs. Vance live to get down to the eighteenth dose, because by that time your wife would have returned. In any case, none of this applies because it was in the thirteenth dose that you did kill her."

"I certainly did not," said Bryan. "I hope you didn't say that to try to catch me, Inspector. And for goodness sake don't try, in your tricky way, to take the fact that I am arguing about details as an admission of guilt. It isn't anything of the sort: you, not I, insisted on my going into all this. Anyhow, I'll go on. Your next point, or at any rate the next I've made a note of, was that I put Salaman on to the essence of almonds. I don't think that is even worth answering: nobody who wasn't utterly prejudiced could twist that out of a casual remark of mine in the middle of a general argument. And as for that bit of moonshine about the kitchen, unsupported, apparently, by any evidence——! And then all this about my quarrel with my wife. And my going to the dark room to get cyanide. You drag everything in, don't you?

"What you've done, as far as I can see, is to get your knife into me—God knows why!—and decide right off that I'm the murderer. Then without being disturbed by the fact that I've no motive, you've put your own interpretation on a hundred things that I did in perfect innocence. You've no evidence, and it is just your word against mine—or your imagination against the facts. I can't prove that I stayed late in my room working, before tea on the day Mrs. Vance died, and you can't prove I went then to get cyanide. I can't prove that I didn't monkey with

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

those essences in the kitchen, and you can't prove that I did. But you don't worry about proof, and as soon as you can think up a motive for me you'll arrest me. Then you'll produce your case in court and talk about circumstantial evidence, and I suppose if you can bring enough of it things will look black for me, because my statement that I wasn't somewhere after you've shown that I could have been there isn't likely to be accepted. That's how it will go, isn't it? And then I'll be found guilty. Guilty of murder!"

Bryan stopped then and looked at Cheviot. But if he was looking for sympathy he certainly didn't get it. Cheviot didn't say anything: he just looked back at Bryan icily, and quite callously.

"Yes, I suppose so," Bryan went on. "And then they'll hang me. And you'll get on with hunting some other poor devil.

"It's the foulest business, but it just shows it's no good not taking you seriously. And that being so, I'm afraid I'll have to do something I don't like doing, something I wouldn't have done otherwise. But I've got to get clear of this, and as far as I can see the only way is to convince you that if you did arrest me and try to get me hanged I could muck up your case sufficiently to get myself off and leave you looking silly."

"Oh," said Cheviot, "then you have got an answer to all this?"

"I've given you enough already for any sensible chap, but if that doesn't stop you I'll have to do more. That's what I'm saying. I'll have to show you that every single thing you've got against me applies equally much to other people."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Cheviot's eyebrows went up—"sardonically," I suppose you'd call it.

"And you don't like doing that, Mr. Malcolm? I had an idea you had already called my attention to the possible guilt of Mr. Vance and of Mrs. Rackstraw. And I think you once said something, too, about Mr. Salaman."

"You *are* a foul brute, Inspector," cried Bryan. "You always pick on chance remarks and produce them as deliberate statements. I know what you mean about Mrs. Rack: I instanced her way of hitting out at Mrs. Vance when we were all discussing the way people let off steam. And now you call that 'drawing attention to her possible guilt.' All the same, if what I'm going to do makes you think still worse of me, I just can't help it. Things are getting too serious for me to be scrupulous. I'm going to show you what you ought to have seen for yourself all along—and I admit I've hinted at it myself more than once. It's perfectly plain that anyone who used your funny methods could work up a murder case against anyone in this house. Anyone! Take Salaman, for a start. Even you will admit, I suppose, that he had a good chance to monkey with bottles the night the medicine arrived: not only was he alone in the building at locking-up time, but he kept the key and could have come back during the night. Half a dozen witnesses would prove that he helped to persuade Mrs. Vance to take her medicine regularly. And of course in his case there's no need to pick bits out of a conversation and say they were meant to suggest adding the essence—oh no, in his case there is just the clear fact that it was he who did suggest adding it to the medicine. He fetched it himself—choosing almonds particu-

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

larly, apparently—and poured it into the bottle. Obviously, he could have used his key in the night and have taken cyanide from the dark room. And you yourself said just now that the changing of bottles could have been done while other people were in the room, so there's no obstacle about that. And if you want a bit more against him there's the fact—most suspicious, you know!—that immediately after Mrs. Vance died, Salaman picked up the medicine bottle, sniffed at it and passed it to several of us to smell: if it hadn't been for that I suppose you could have nailed someone on finger prints alone, and who's to say it wasn't done on purpose?

“Well, there you are. A nice circumstantial case against Mr. Salaman. No motive, of course: but then you don't regard motive as important, do you?”

“Mind you, I'm not suggesting for a moment that Salaman did it. All I want to do is to show you that, by your line of reasoning, he *could* have done it and that he's just as likely a murderer as me. The same applies to all the others, every one of them. And if you do your worst and arrest me, I shall show that there isn't one of your big points that only applies to me. And if you do produce a motive for me, I shall show that other people had motives as well—and that's not an admission that I have got a motive, so don't let your sergeant put it down as one.”

“What motives had other people got?” Cheviot demanded.

“You say I've already told you. Charles and his £8,000. Mrs. Rack disliking Mrs. Vance, finding the old lady got on her nerves and spoilt her quiet evenings. And I suppose if you count that kind of thing there's Joan with her pride hurt because Mrs. Vance

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

always treated her as a sixteen-year-old child. And Salaman always sore because she used to have private confabs with the staff and encourage them to stand up to him. Nothing that I would regard as an adequate motive for murder, but all a lot nearer to it than anything you can possibly produce for me.

"If you go on with this case against me, Inspector, all those points have got to be brought out. If you talk about taking cyanide from the dark room, who had the best opportunity of all? Nevil Church, of course, because he's there alone all day. If you talk about the idea of making the medicine smell of almonds, you'll have to face the point that it wasn't me but Salaman who produced the stuff. If you take up the point about seeing that Mrs. Vance didn't get behind with her doses, the answer will be that that was all started by Charles and Salaman. I've got an answer to every accusation you can make. And the biggest answer of all is that I didn't do it and I absolutely defy you, cunning and unscrupulous as you are, to prove that I did."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOR about four hours after that, Cheviot was like one of the early Saints (though no comparison could be more inapt!) who wrestled with temptation. At any rate he appeared to be struggling with the devil within himself, and not to be enjoying the process of becoming a battlefield. Sometimes he roamed blindly about the garden, at others he lay on his bed and moaned. From such disjointed fragments of speech as reached me in intelligible form, I gathered that the fight was between his common sense and his prejudices, between the growing realization that he had nothing against Bryan on which even suspicion could be founded and his hatred of admitting that he had made a mistake.

Also like the Saints, he fasted. The gong for lunch provoked no response in him, and when after five minutes I mentioned that our meal was waiting, he only said, "If you feel you can eat, you had better get on with it. I can't. I've got to think this damned thing out."

There is no pleasure in either trotting at the heels of a demented man round a garden or listening to groans in a small bedroom, so I was glad to leave him, even though it meant sitting at table with Salaman, Malcolm and the others. In fact I spun out the meal for as long as I could. I listened to Bryan's plaintive complacency, to Blossie's giggles, to Charles's expostulations and to Mrs. Rackstraw attempting to lift the

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

conversation on to a higher intellectual plane. I watched the sanctimonious pretences of Mr. Salaman that perfect peace still reigned in his family party, the ingenuousness of Nevil Church, and Mrs. Malcolm's severe attitude of reproof about everything that everyone did. And I was ogled most painfully by Joan. But for all that I found mental refreshment to balance that supplied to my stomach by a mess of broken sardines on toast which was even oilier than Salaman's smile.

Consequently, when I returned with dread to the bedroom, I found no comfort in the sight of Cheviot, more dishevelled than ever, bouncing in apparent internal agony on the bed. For another hour after that he continued to moan and groan. Then, when I was feeling I could stand it no longer and had better incur all the wrath of the Yard authorities by deserting my superior officer in the middle of an important case, he suddenly sat up and swung his feet on to the floor.

He ran his fingers through his hair. Then he staggered like a drunken man to the dressing-table and regarded himself in the mirror. I took it as a sign of returning sanity that he didn't like what he saw there. He said, "My God!" and grabbed at his hair brushes. Then he had a wash, still keeping me on tenterhooks by his silence. After that he lit a cigarette and inhaled the smoke luxuriously. He was, apparently, a restored man.

He sat down, wrong way round on a hard chair with his forearms on the back of it. Then he said, in a perfectly calm tone and without any reference to recent madness, "Everything that Bryan Malcolm said just now" (he didn't seem to realize that it was

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

four hours before) "is perfectly sound. He has an answer to all my points. There is nothing that I have tried to fix on him that could not equally well have been done by other people—and in most cases by several other people. He hasn't a shadow of a motive, and I can't tie one on to him. I can't even think of one.

"Where I've gone wrong, Ross, is that I have let myself be prejudiced. Goodness knows I hate that kind of thing: I've always maintained that the worst fault a detective can commit is to approach a case without an open mind, and the next worst is to stop having an open mind at any point before actually getting out the handcuffs. But that is exactly what I've done. And it hasn't led me anywhere except into a ghastly muddle and the waste of a couple of days. Now I've got to start again. I've been a fool."

With the least encouragement from me, Cheviot would have abased himself still further. I have no doubt that if I had liked I could more or less have had him crawling about the carpet. But I have a magnanimous nature, so I held out a friendly hand to him. "Well," I said, "there's no harm done. It isn't as if you had put in a report to the Yard, or actually applied for a warrant."

"No, thank God," he answered. "Well, what do we do now? Whom are we going for? Salaman? Blossie? Charles Vance? I'm hanged if I know. And as a matter of fact I suppose we shan't 'go for' anybody—we'll just start on the whole case anew and see where it leads us.

"Mind you," he went on a moment later, "when we get the motive we have got the case. *How* this thing was done is plain enough, now. There is only one

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

point missing in the story and that is why the murderer didn't plug in the poison as soon as he had it in his hands and had inculpated the other people—but that, I think, will be clear when we get the motive. Well, it's no good doing any more talking. We've got all the facts before us and it is just a case of seeing them straight. I'm now going to work that out if it takes me all day and all the night. I must go over all the evidence again till I see where I missed the import of some incident or something that was said. You had better try your hand at that too, Ross. I've been keeping you on a short lead so far because I didn't altogether trust you. But I must admit that you didn't make the damn fool mistake I made. So now you had better see what you can produce. Sit down in that chair and do some sound thinking."

"Do you mind if I do it outside—in the open air?" I suggested.

"Do it anywhere, so long as you get results," he retorted.

So, because I was ready enough to try my own hand but didn't want to do it in his company and under his eye, I went out into the garden.

It may sound a bit fanciful, but I saw this case as a sort of diagram: a circle, with Mrs. Vance at the centre and all the people who might have killed her dotted about on the circumference. Cheviot had been trying to work from the circumference towards the centre: that is to say, he had interviewed all the suspects in turn, looking for strings that would connect them with Mrs. Vance. I decided to work the other way, from the centre outwards towards the circumference: I would start with Mrs. Vance, get together

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

all I could about her, and see whether that information led me towards any of the other people. This seemed to me a much more sensible way of going about the business, because you can't get away from the fact that the corpse really is the centre of a murder case. Moreover, the corpse is real and identified, the murderer is real but unidentified, and the suspects, although probably identified, are unreal because all but one of them do not matter. If, as Nevil Church would have said, you see what I mean.

I think it is safe to say that in every murder case the motive must concern both the murderer and the victim, and both of them must have known (even if no one else did) of its existence. The victim very likely never realized that the fact which the murderer thought of as either justifying murder or making it necessary could possibly lead to anything so drastic and terrible. But the victim cannot have been completely blind to its existence.

If that is so, then Mrs. Vance must have known of whatever it was that led to her death. She must have known that someone wanted her money, if that was the motive, or that—— Or that—— Well, anyway, whatever it was, she must have known of it.

The murderer knew too, but he wouldn't talk. So I could only get at it through Mrs. Vance. She couldn't talk either now, of course, but she might have done something, or said something, shortly before her death which would point at the murderer's motive.

I remembered that vision—if that is the right thing to call it—which I had had when I first went into Mrs. Vance's bedroom. I had seen her then as a worried old lady, worried over all the things that

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

people had told her and confided to her, and coming to the quiet of her own room to think about them. Presumably she would have worried over more personal troubles there too, and have discussed them also with her gallery of friends and the moustachioed soldier whose picture hung over her bed. A pity those people couldn't talk! Then we would know what was in her mind.

I went over that again, and arrived at the same conclusion. It didn't seem to me to be reasonable that someone living at the farm with her could have had a reason for wanting to kill her, without her knowing of the trouble and numbering it among her worries.

In that case, the first thing I had to do was to find out what her worries were in her last few days—and then to pick out the one which was the motive for her murder.

How was I to get at them? She had brooded rather than talked a lot, and a great many thoughts might have gone through her mind, poor old soul, without anyone knowing of them. Well, I couldn't help that: I must start on the things she had talked about.

I sat down on a garden seat and wrote out a sort of diary of the last day in Mrs. Vance's life. Here it is:

- 8. 0 Breakfast
- 8.30 say Took dose of medicine
- 8.35 say Went with Charles to common-room
- 12.40 Received Bryan and heard of his scheme
- 12.45 Saw Nevil Church coming into common-room and going out again quickly when he saw Bryan

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

- 1. 0 Lunch
- 1.30 say Took dose of medicine
- 1.35 say Returned to common-room
- 4. 0 Tea
- 4.22 say Left common-room
- 4.25 say Reached Joan Salaman's room
- 5. 0 Returned to common-room
- 5.15 Received Charles, heard his version of
the "scheme" and promised him the
money
- 7. 0 Dinner
- 7.30 say Went with everyone to the common-room
- 7.35 Took thirteenth dose of medicine
- 7.37 Died

I read that through several times, thinking about each line of it, and it seemed to me that there were at least four interesting pointers in it. I should have to have interviews with Nevil Church, Mrs. Rackstraw, Joan Salaman and Charles Vance. I hoped Cheviot wouldn't want to start hunting someone for a couple of hours at least.

I decided to start with Mrs. Rackstraw and to deal with her, not as Cheviot would have done, but by what has always seemed to me the proper method of detection.

It was on this "method of detection" that I discoursed in my lecture to Cheviot as we drove down to Avonbridge. I regard it as just plain foolishness to go to one's suspects and say in effect, "I am a Scotland Yard detective, I suspect you of murder and I am now going to put you through it." That, of course, puts them on their guard at once: whereas the whole principle of detection should be to get sus-

Death in the Thirtcenth Dose

pects off their guard so that they unwittingly reveal things that they don't want revealed. The ideal method of doing the job, in my opinion, would be to make no official call at the scene of the crime at all—the local cops could do that—but only to snoop around in disguise, making friends with the suspects and so getting them to talk. It would be as good a job for girl detectives as for men—the Mata Hari touch applied to murder cases.

The present regulations of the Yard allow that kind of thing in minor crime, but in murder cases the detectives always start by introducing themselves openly (and even having their names announced to the world—and to the murderer—in the press). Only the kind of sideline enquiry which is made by junior sergeants may be conducted on the "incognito principle." I can't think why.

In this case it was too late for me to get back to that scheme, but I meant to take advantage of the very minor role I had so far played, disassociate myself from Cheviot and all that anyone would think he was doing, and try to get under people's skins by "histrionic subterfuge."

In the case of Mrs. Rackstraw, it would have been easier to start if I could have contrived an accidental meeting with her in the passage. But as I hadn't that amount of luck, I had to go to her office. It was much the same as the others I had seen, except that it contained no pictures at all (thereby giving the impression that she wasn't interested in photography, which after all is not one of the Arts) whereas open and apparently well-read books of the more serious sort were lying on the chairs, the desk and even the floor. She had a pen in her hand—it was poised in

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

the air as I came in, as if it awaited divine inspiration before plunging towards paper—and she had all the appearance of a stage poetess at work. Actually, I think she was inventing titles for the photographs.

I said, "Afternoon, Mrs. Rackstraw. Do you mind if I interrupt you for a moment? The fact is I'm rather new to this detection business—I've only been at the Yard a few months—and I'm tremendously interested in the theory of how it ought to be done. I was struck by what you were saying about 'the psychological approach.' I wondered, as I've got a few minutes to spare, whether you would care to help me by expanding the idea. It sounds so very much more logical than the ordinary methods adopted by the police."

I suppose I was helped by the fact that I look a very innocent sort of fool. Anyway, she fell for it and was delighted to lecture me for ten minutes. I don't think she said anything worth repeating or even remembering. When I could get a word in, I brought her from precept to example.

"I think that is awfully sound," I said. "If I understand you aright, if I suspected you of Mrs. Vance's murder—of course I don't, but I'm taking that as an example—I shouldn't bother about *how* you could have killed her, I should only consider whether in character you are capable of committing a murder. H'm. Well, I think that would let you out straight away." Out-Chevioting Cheviot, I gave her my most beaming smile. "I should say you are kind and good-hearted, and ready to exert yourself to help people, even when they aren't likely to show you any particular gratitude. Like when you went down to get the tea in place of Mrs. Malcolm on the day of Mrs.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Vance's death, and found she was already doing the job: I don't suppose you got any thanks for that kind action, did you?"

"Not a word," she answered. "But I wouldn't have expected it from Mother M. In fact she was rather rude to me because I showed I had expected her not to come down."

"Still," I suggested, "she might have appreciated that you had interrupted your important work to help her. You must have wasted quite twenty minutes, because it can't have been worth while going back to start again when you found you weren't wanted. I call it pretty sporting of you, quite in keeping with your character as I read it. I suppose you just waited for your tea in the common-room, didn't you?"

"Yes," she answered. "A complete waste of time, because there was only Mrs. Vance there and she wasn't even a conversationalist. As a matter of fact, she was particularly silent, even for her, that afternoon. She only made one remark to me in a quarter of an hour, and she made that twice, in exactly the same words, although I answered it the first time. That was just like her."

"Another point in your character, as I read it," I said, "is long-suffering patience. Fools must be particularly trying to you, but I gather you don't often show it. Also people like Mrs. Vance, continually repeating things which wouldn't be of importance even if only said once. Or was this remark of hers unusually profound?"

"Not a bit," she said. "She merely asked if Joan was coming down to tea. A silly question, because Joan always came to tea, as we all did. I told her so,

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

but five minutes later there she was again asking 'Is Joan coming to tea?' as if in the interval she had been thinking about nothing but that, and as if the inquiry was more important than the things that normally intelligent people think about."

"Oh well, I said, "I don't suppose she thought about interesting things at all."

I then wasted five minutes more on psychology, to cover the fact that I had got exactly the pointer I wanted and to remove the possibility of Mrs. Rackstraw looking back on our talk afterwards and wondering whether I had wanted anything.

Then, after a graceful exit, I went to see Nevil Church in the dark room.

"Hope I shan't be interrupting you," I began to him, "but I want someone human to talk to. A chap of my age can't be sleuthing all the time, so when my boss kicked me out because he said he wanted to be alone, I thought I'd roll along and pass the time of day with you."

I passed across my cigarette-case as I spoke. Nevil said we couldn't smoke in there, it wasn't allowed and anyway it made the air too thick. But he could do with a breather outside. He too, I was glad to see, seemed to think me harmless and amiable.

We went into the garden. "It is really not much fun," I remarked, "tagging around all day after a chap like Burmann. He keeps his nose down and never takes a minute off the job. That's not my idea of life at all. I want to put business out of my mind every so often and relax over a cigarette. But Burmann is always grim and serious. How do you get on with your bosses here? Of course Malcolm must be something of a terror, but I should have set Vance

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

down as just the opposite, a decent, human sort of chap."

"Quite a lot of the time you'd think he was," said Nevil.

"But when he's bad he's horrid, you mean? I know that sort. Chaps like that have usually got some sort of a kink. I expect Vance has, hasn't he?"

"Yes—es, I think so," said Nevil. "I expect bachelors of that age often have."

"Yes, that's what I meant," I said, though for the life of me I couldn't see what he was hinting at. "I expect it is all based on that."

Nevil suddenly kicked rather savagely at a pebble on the path.

"All the same," he said, "it's a bit thick. I mean, if he can't help having a dirty mind, he ought to keep his rotten imagination to himself."

He was doing nicely in the way of giving me what I wanted. Taking that remark as a direct reference to some particular occasion, I should have liked to press him for details: but that, of course, would have scared him off. Besides, it would have been out of character for my part. So I said instead, "If he is like that, and Malcolm is the kind of beast he seems to be, it's a good job you've got Joan on your side. She must be a considerable help when it all gets unbearable."

That let me in for listening for the next three or four minutes to his love-talk. I got the impression he could have gone on with it for hours without repeating himself. But when I felt he was beginning to forget my existence, I put in a word.

"And of course," I said, "Mrs. Vance must have been a help to you, too. You'll miss her, poor old

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

thing. Did you ever manage to catch her with that last little worry of yours—the one you came to talk to her about on her last morning, when you found Bryan with her?”

I bent down, at that, to examine the name-plate of a rose in a flower-bed, hoping to convince him that I wasn't particularly interested in his answer. But in spite of that, he seemed to see the red light at once and his voice became several degrees harder than it had been a moment before. “No,” he said. “No, I didn't see her again. Not to speak to, I mean.”

“It is bad luck,” I suggested, as casually as I could, “being left like that with an unsolved problem.”

“Oh well, it isn't quite that,” he answered. “There wasn't any problem, because I just didn't believe what I was told. And when I went in that time, I—I hadn't anything big to say. I'd told her all about it before that. All I wanted was to get her to confirm something.”

“I'm glad of that,” I said. “I know it's hell to have a major worry on hand. I've had lots in my time. Usually about girls.”

He shied again immediately, but that didn't matter. The very fact that he did shy told me what I wanted to know.

So when he said he had to get back to his work, I let him go.

I took another turn round the garden, thinking the thing out in the light of what I had just learnt—or, to be more accurate, in the light of the conclusions I thought I could draw from what had been said and what had been left unsaid. It looked very much as if Mrs. Vance had talked to Joan, not about her flirtation with Nevil, but about something which

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

had been in Charles's "rotten imagination," and had been repeated to Mrs. Vance by Nevil. I didn't think that was too big an assumption, since it was clear that when Nevil got upset it was generally about something to do with Joan—and he was pretty badly upset about something which Charles had said to him. Probably something not at all nice. Probably something which Joan did not at all want talked about. And in that case it was at least "interesting" that Mrs. Vance had been murdered three hours later!

As far as we knew at present, Joan had had no chance of changing the bottles between five o'clock and eight. On the other hand she easily might have done: there was no evidence but her own that Mrs. Vance returned to the common-room at five, leaving Joan in her own office, and it was at least possible that Joan went to the common-room in front of Mrs. Vance and changed the bottles then. That would have to be looked into.

In the meantime, I had to find out exactly what was the accusation which Charles had made against her. Joan wouldn't tell me if I asked her. In his present mood, Nevil wouldn't tell me either. So the only person I could possibly get to talk about it was Charles Vance. And it wouldn't be easy to get it out of him.

I spent several minutes thinking of a scheme. Flattery had worked with Mrs. Rackstraw and friendliness with Nevil Church, but neither of those would get me far with Charles. Of course it was a little odd that if he knew something really bad about the girl he had gossiped about it at all, and to a junior member of the staff, known to be in love with Joan, at that. But it would be very much odder still if he

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

could be easily persuaded to talk about it, not merely to a stranger, but to a member of the much disliked police.

However, the thing had to be done, and at last I worked out a possible plan. I went to Charles's room, knocking politely on the door. When I went in he said, "Oh Lord!" in the most unwelcoming tone imaginable. Then he said, "Where's Inspector Burmann? Is he following you?"

"No," I answered. "He's busy. But I haven't come to bother you with questions, Mr. Vance. That sort of thing is the Inspector's job and I'm only the note-taker. What I've come for is to ask if you'd be so good as to give me some advice."

"What sort of advice? What about?"

"About Mr. Church," I explained. "He is presenting rather a problem, and although you probably—and naturally—regard the police as being quite callous, as a matter of fact we are human enough not to want to stir up private troubles where they don't want stirring. Mr. Church's manner suggests that he is being secretive. Of course that kind of thing makes us suspicious at once. On the other hand, it doesn't necessarily mean what it appears to mean. For instance, Church may be a chap with a naturally furtive expression and a habit of keeping all his thoughts to himself."

"Oh, he certainly isn't like that," said Charles. "Quite the contrary. He chatters to everyone about his private affairs and never troubles to hide his feelings in the slightest. It gets rather intolerable at times. I mean his way of conducting what he probably regards as a love-affair, in full view of everyone in the place."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

I might have followed that up, but at the moment I wasn't looking for short cuts.

"But even if it isn't his usual character," I said, "he certainly does give the impression just now that he is taking care to hide something. That means either that he is the murderer, or else that he has some big worry on his mind of quite a different type."

For a moment Charles did not answer. Then he said, "I can hardly imagine anyone less likely to be a murderer. On the other hand it is extremely likely that he is worried. If an inexperienced youngster is fool enough to imagine himself in love with—well, with a much more experienced woman, he is lucky if he gets through it with nothing worse than worries."

"Oh," I said. "That's it, is it? Do you mean he has got entangled with a married woman?"

"Married?" he repeated. "Good Lord, no. Joan isn't married. But she is very far from being a green-horn like young Nevil."

"Joan? Do you mean Joan Salaman?" I asked, very innocently. "Are they in love with one another?"

"Joan certainly isn't in love with him," he answered.

"If she was," I suggested, "I shouldn't think he was the first man she had looked at in that way. She has got a hard-boiled look."

He didn't seem to like that very much. "She is a very modern young woman," he said. "Ideas on that subject nowadays aren't what they were twenty or thirty years ago. We can do things now that would have meant social excommunication then. But that won't help Nevil Church. His outlook on life is a generation behind his age."

"I see," I said, borrowing Cheviot's phrase. "So

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

you think Church's worry might mean that he has learnt that Joan Salaman has been doing something a bit 'modern'? Going on the tiles, in fact? If that were established, we needn't worry about him in this murder case. But I suppose it isn't established. You are only guessing, aren't you?"

Again he hesitated. "I doubt if Inspector Burmann would accept my word for it," he said at last, "but I'm not guessing. I happen to know that that is what Nevil is worrying about."

"Do you mean he has picked up some wild bit of slander, or is there foundation for it?"

"I don't see that that matters," he retorted. "You wanted to know the cause of young Nevil's worry, and I've told you. I did that because though he is a poor young fool he isn't a bad boy in some ways. I'm sure he didn't murder my mother—at least, as sure as I can be about anybody—and I don't want him to be tortured by the kind of inquisition the Inspector puts on to people he suspects. But I've no intention of giving you details of what Joan did—I mean of what Nevil suspects her of having done."

"I wouldn't ask you to," I said quickly. "I wouldn't think you the sort of cad who would talk about a thing of that sort where a young girl is concerned."

There was no mistaking the flush that crept over his face. I went on at once, "But it is a relief to know that we needn't chase after what would obviously be a red-herring. I can tell the Inspector that Nevil's secret worry is nothing to do with your mother's death and therefore nothing to do with us. Thank you very much, Mr. Vance."

I left him and went along the passage to Joan's room. I had an idea that here the direct method

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

would do better than any pretences. So before she could even get out the usual "Hullo" and the too-ready smile I said, "Miss Salaman, I want you to tell me, please, about the talk Mrs. Vance had with you after tea on the day she died. You said before that she told you off for being flirtatious with Nevil Church. Is that the only thing she spoke about?"

That seemed quite to rule out the possibility of my getting any smiles. Her eyes went very hard.

"Yes," she said. "Oh yes. That was all."

"I don't think it was," I retorted. "I doubt if she spoke about Nevil Church at all. Didn't she speak about your conduct with somebody else?"

"Get out," she cried, furiously. But I wasn't sure that the fury was altogether genuine. "You've no damned right to come in here and say that kind of thing."

"Is that the answer you gave Mrs. Vance?" I asked.

"It is the answer I should have given her if she had said what you seem to think she said. I don't like people meddling in my affairs."

"That," I said, "implies that there are things in which people could meddle."

"Oh, don't quibble," she snapped. "You know perfectly well what I mean."

I took a chance on that. "I know perfectly well," I retorted, "what Mrs. Vance talked to you about."

It certainly shook her. But she pulled herself together very quickly. "Well, I don't care," she said. "If you know about it, there's no need to come and badger me. I've no intention of talking to you about it, if that's what you want, so you needn't stand there any longer."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

That was certainly true: I had got all I wanted from her. For the moment, anyway.

But there were still two things I hadn't got. One was a more exact account than these hints of what Charles had said to Nevil; the other was how, if at all, that story and the events that followed from telling it fitted into the case of Mrs. Vance's murder.

I felt that the second of those things would follow the first. To get any forrader, I had to know what Charles had said. Joan wasn't going to tell me, nor was Charles. So after all I should have to get it out of Nevil. And he was guarding it too closely for me to wheedle it from him, so the only thing I could do was to *scare* him into telling it. I should have to scare him pretty badly.

I took a couple of turns round the garden, deciding how to do it. Then I marched into the dark room. I didn't knock before entering. And when I was inside I flung the door to with a slam, making him jump. I went up to his desk and leant across it, threateningly.

"Now, see here, Church," I began. "When I talked to you an hour or so ago you didn't tell me very much. In fact, you were damned reticent, which isn't a wise thing—not at all a wise thing—when you are being interviewed by the police."

"Oh, but I wasn't," he answered. "Being interviewed, I mean. That was just a friendly talk. At least, I thought it was."

"Then you had better think again, and think quickly," I retorted. "If you haven't the sense to know that a policeman is always on duty, God help you. I came to you because I wanted information, and you gave me precious little. But you are going

, Death in the Thirteenth Dose

to give me more now, Church, a lot more. In fact you are going to tell the whole story. And it is no use saying you won't talk," I added, as his lips parted, "because you've got to talk. So get going."

"But I don't know anything," he cried. "Nothing at all."

"You'd know quite a lot," I said, "if you only knew as much as I know, now. I know a great deal more than I did an hour ago. I know that what you wanted to discuss with Mrs. Vance was a story told to you by Charles that Joan Salaman had had a night out. I know all about that. And you told me an hour ago that you had repeated it to Mrs. Vance and wanted to discuss it with her again. Now I want the details—the exact details—of the story as Charles told it to you."

The boy had gone very white. But he had a bit of pluck for all that. "I won't tell you," he said. "I'm not going to say a word. I'd—I'd rather die."

"Oh, don't be an ass," I retorted. "You are much more likely to die if you keep silent—a very nasty death, at the end of a rope. Haven't you thought of that? Don't you realize that this is a murder case and that anybody who hides things comes under suspicion of being the murderer? Why should anyone else want things hidden?"

"But it isn't anything to do with that. It's just that it—it isn't my secret and I can't tell it——"

"You had no hesitation about telling Mrs. Vance and then trying to discuss it with her a second time."

He had been flushed a minute before but now he was getting rather white again, which I took to be a good sign. He was also stammering.

"B-but that's different. I t-told her I d-didn't believe it."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose .

"Then you can tell me you don't believe it, too. I don't care. But I want you to understand this, Church. Charles told you this thing, and in spite of all your noble ideals about keeping secrets you went straight off and blabbed to Mrs. Vance about it. You thought you'd get sympathy from her and be told that she also didn't believe it. But that didn't happen, did it? She looked very much as if she did believe it, and what's more as if she was going to talk about it. Then you saw what a silly fool you'd been. The last thing on earth you wanted was for Mrs. Vance to go to Joan and repeat to her this very slanderous story, saying that she got it from you. A nice chance you'd have of making any headway with Joan if that happened! So I suppose you begged Mrs. Vance to keep silent and not give you away. She wouldn't promise to do that, in fact she made it still more clear that she meant to go to Joan. So there was only one way for you to make absolutely sure she would keep silence for ever. Only one way—to kill her. And you did it."

The chap looked as if he was about to faint. I've never seen anybody go such a ghastly colour: he could hardly have looked more horrified if I had been making out a serious case against him, instead of merely trying to frighten him into talking.

"I didn't," he cried. "It isn't true. I didn't, I really didn't."

"Murderers don't often plead guilty," I said. "They always swear they didn't do it, so we don't pay much attention to that. But I'll tell you this, Church; if you don't want to get hanged for this crime, whether you did it or not, you had better speak up now and tell me exactly what happened."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

The poor devil was all of a shake by this time, and I had got him just where I wanted him.

"I'll tell you," he said. "I must. Only you've got to understand that I didn't believe a word of what Charles said about Joan. And I told Mrs. Vance I didn't. I only went to her because——"

"Pull yourself together and start at the beginning," I said.

It took him nearly a minute to get a hold on himself and start telling the story coherently. That minute was filled with protestations that even being hanged didn't matter to him as much as letting Joan think he had believed the story. That just shows the state he was in.

About ten days before Mrs. Vance's death, he told me at last, Charles had sent for him, and he had gone expecting to get the usual kind of instructions about developing plates. Instead of that, Charles began at once to talk to him about Joan. I gather he was persuasive in quite a kindly tone at first, telling Nevil that Joan wasn't his type and that he would do better to get interested in some quiet girl who would make the sort of wife he could make a nice home with.

But Nevil went up in the air at once: he said he wasn't answerable to Charles about his private affairs and that he was going to do what he liked. He also said that he was "deeply attached" to Joan and hoped that she would consent to marry him. Charles said, "Don't be a fool. She wouldn't dream of marrying you, marriage isn't what she's after." Getting more angry every minute, Nevil said that wasn't true. Then he rather spoilt the effect by saying "How do you know, anyway?"

Charles answered, "I know quite a bit about Joan.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Certainly quite enough to assure you that she isn't the kind of girl one takes to the altar and then sets up a home with. That kind of thing wouldn't appeal to Joan in the least. One day she may do it, perhaps, but it won't be yet and it certainly won't be with you. So if you don't want to make a mess of your life you had better leave her alone and get interested in somebody else."

That started Nevil off on his high-falutin' stuff about love, with special reference to the impossibility of love in connection with Joan being anything but beautiful and eternal. But Charles very soon stopped him and told him he was talking tripe. "Joan doesn't care a pin about you," he declared. "I know that for a fact." "You can't possibly know it," Nevil retorted, and then Charles said, "If you won't believe it, I'll make it perfectly plain. Don't make a fool of yourself by talking about this—you won't if you really care for Joan as you say you do—but get her into some quiet spot and then ask her where she spent last Sunday night." Nevil said, "I know that. She went to stay with one of her old school friends." Charles said, "Oh no. No she didn't. That's only what people are meant to think. She wasn't there at all. And she was *not* with a girl friend."

Nevil reacted in a very conventional way, threatening to choke Charles with the lie in his throat. Charles merely said, "It is a fact, anyway." Then, while Nevil spluttered and raged, he went on, "Of course, you *may* have the sense not to speak to Joan about this. She won't like you any better if you do, in fact I don't see how you could stay in the same building with her afterwards. So if you take my advice you'll keep quiet about it. But I know what I'm talking about and I

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

hope it will convince you that it is absolutely useless for you to think about Joan any more."

Nevil went away in a pretty bad state. He was too far gone, of course, to believe the story, but he couldn't stop thinking about it and during the rest of that day all sorts of possibilities occurred to him. The worst one, from his point of view, was that Charles might tell that awful slander to someone else and so let it "get about." He wouldn't have dreamt, of course, of speaking to Joan; his only idea, he swore to me, was to prevent her being made miserable by hearing about it. But he wanted to stop Charles from repeating it, and after a lot of feverish thought he decided that the only way was to go to Mrs. Vance. That would entail repeating the story himself, of course, but he regarded Mrs. Vance as absolutely trustworthy: he knew she would be as horrified at the slander as he was, and he counted on her being able to deal effectively with her son.

So the next morning he went to her, swore her to secrecy, and told her what Charles had said. Almost before he had finished, she said, "Oh dear, dear, I never dreamt things were as bad as that. You did say 'last Sunday,' Nevil? You are absolutely sure it was that night?"

He didn't know what she meant, and anyway he was much too preoccupied over repeating that she mustn't say a word except to Charles, so that he didn't worry then over the way she had taken it. But afterwards he did worry because she had not said as he had done that no one could possibly think of that kind of thing in connection with Joan. On the contrary, she had seemed almost as if she believed the story.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

That didn't shake his own faith—or so he said—but it led to another and even more dreadful idea. Supposing Mrs. Vance forgot her promise and said something to Joan. And supposing Joan said "Who repeated this awful lie to you?" And supposing, when she heard who it was, Joan said, "Oh, so Nevil believed that of me, did he?"

So he went to Mrs. Vance again, about that. She said, "It's all right, Nevil, just leave it to me." He couldn't get her to say what she was going to do. He thought she seemed almost as worried as he was.

In the next few days, he said, his worry got worse and worse. He was terrified every day of finding that Joan knew. He tried to keep out of her way. He also avoided Mrs. Vance, in case she was forgetting it and the sight of him reminded her. He was half out of his mind. And when he couldn't stand the worry any longer, he went once more to see Mrs. Vance. But he couldn't talk to her then, because Bryan was with her. "And I didn't see her again," he finished, "except at lunch and tea. I thought of trying to get her alone, only I kept putting it off, because I wasn't sure whether I'd make things better or make them worse. I told you, didn't I, that I went to see Joan just before tea, that day? Well, I had to, I couldn't bear it any longer. Not knowing whether she had been told yet, I mean. She obviously hadn't, she was quite nice to me, so I thought I wouldn't go to Mrs. Vance again till the next day. And then after dinner she died. And—oh, I wasn't glad, because I'd been fond of her, but in a way it was a tremendous relief, if you know what I mean. It was pretty obvious by then that Charles wasn't going to say things to anyone else, so now the thing couldn't get about at

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

all. Joan wouldn't hear of the beastly lie, and what in a way was even more important to me, she wouldn't know that I had talked about it."

He stopped. Then, rather hesitatingly, he said, "I know all this is awfully like what you said just now. But I can't help it, it's the truth. And I didn't kill her, I didn't have anything to do with her dying. I swear I didn't."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I HAD got all I wanted from Nevil then, so I left him. In the passage outside the dark room I ran full tilt into Cheviot. I didn't want him at that moment, because I had to think out the implications of what I had learnt and see where they would lead me. But meeting him like that I couldn't get away so I had to make the best of it. I said, "We had better go to our room. I've got a lot to tell you."

Then, in Mrs. Vance's bedroom, I told him everything. His expression as I began was that of a much-tried father who doesn't want to show boredom and irritation at yet another repetition of his infant's meaningless prattle. But gradually he became interested. He let me go on to the end without interruption, and then he said, "That's very good work, Ross. I congratulate you. You aren't such a fool after all. I think when this case is over, you had better sit down and learn the Judges' Rules by heart, because you've been sailing pretty near the wind, particularly with Nevil Church. I don't mind, I do it myself sometimes, but if it came out in court the judge would tell you off and then the Sunday papers would start a crusade against the Yard. Apart from that, it's all good, very good. And it fits in with something I've worked out—the reason, or at least a possible reason, why the murderer waited those five days. Now just keep quiet a minute. I want to check an idea."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

He wasn't silent for more than a minute. Then he said, "I suppose you've seen where your discoveries lead? The motive and the identity of the murderer, I mean?"

"I thought of Joan," I said.

He shook his head violently. "Not sufficient motive," he said. "A girl of Joan's type wouldn't be particularly ashamed of that sort of thing, and she certainly wouldn't do murder just because she was accused of it. Besides, if she wanted to stop the story getting about, it wouldn't have been enough to kill Mrs. Vance: she'd have had to trace it to its source and kill everyone who knew it. Which she certainly hasn't done. No, it wasn't Joan. No other ideas?"

"I haven't had time to think it out," I said.

He seemed, for once, to be in a very good humour. "It's a sad pity, Ross," he said in quite a conversational tone. "You've done brilliant work this afternoon, getting practically all we wanted to complete what we knew already. But you'll never be any good as a detective unless you can understand your own discoveries. This thing is absolutely plain now. You don't need to think about it: it sticks out a mile. Well, come on, we'll finish it off. All we need are one or two bits of proof, which won't be difficult to find now we know——" He broke off suddenly and smiled at me. "Sorry, I should have said 'now I know what is wanted.' But you'll know too in a few minutes. I won't bother to get a special warrant. I've an open one in my pocket, and I'll use that. Come along."

He led me first to Mr. Salaman's room.

"I want you to tell me, not by guess-work but with absolute certainty," he said, "who besides Mrs. Mal-

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

colm did not sleep here during the last week-end but one before Mrs. Vance's death."

"Dear me," said Salaman, "you seem to get farther and farther away, Inspector, from the original dates. At first you were only concerned with April 6th, then you went back——"

"I haven't a great deal of time to spare," said Cheviot.

"Yes, yes," said Salaman. "Of course. Well, it is quite a long time ago, I couldn't possibly remember—— But my diary will show. Oh yes, Joan went to spend that week-end with an old school-friend at Berkhamsted. And Charles Vance went off in his car on Sunday morning and didn't return till early on Monday. I think he had a breakdown. That is all, Inspector."

"Thank you," said Cheviot. "I thought so."

Outside the door, he said to me, "Now for Miss Salaman. I hope she won't be difficult."

Joan did not produce the usual welcoming smile. As soon as she looked up from her desk and saw us—or rather, I suppose, as soon as she saw me—her face assumed a defiant sort of look. Seeing it, I wouldn't have started off as Cheviot did.

"Miss Salaman," he said, "I want you please to understand that I know how you spent the night of the last Sunday but one before Mrs. Vance's death. I don't want to embarrass you about that——"

"Oh, for God's sake shut up," she cried. "Don't be so horribly Victorian. You're worse than Auntie Lou—and she at least had the excuse of being old."

Cheviot looked completely out of his depth. "I'm sorry," he said, stiffly.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Well, go on," she cried. "Ask your damned questions. I don't mind. What are they?"

"There is only one," said Cheviot. "Mrs. Vance came to see you here about twenty minutes past four on the day she died. You told me she only spoke about you and Nevil, but that wasn't true. She spoke about—this other business. What I want to know now is whether that was the first time she had mentioned it to you?"

"Oh no," answered Joan. "She had been on to it several times. I don't know how she found out. She wouldn't tell me that. But she kept on making a song about it."

"And I suppose," said Cheviot, "the first time she spoke of it was just after the—er—occurrence?"

She looked at him with hard eyes above a taunting smile.

"Yes," she said. "Three days after I had my night out."

Cheviot turned without another word and marched out of the room. This time he did not speak to me in the passage. We went into Charles Vance's room, and directly he had shut the door, Cheviot said, "Mr. Vance, in view of the questions I am now going to ask you, it is my duty to warn you that what you say may be taken down in writing and used in evidence."

Charles went very white as he said slowly, "Good—God!"

Cheviot said, "I have heard about the story concerning Joan Salaman which you told to Nevil Church. I want to know how you obtained that information."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

As if he had not heard that, Charles said, "You can't possibly be seriously suspecting me of killing my own mother! I've told you already——"

Cheviot said, "Take notes of this, Sergeant Ross. Mr. Vance, you heard what I asked you. Are you going to tell me how you got that information about Miss Salaman, or not?"

"I don't see what it has got to do with you," answered Charles. "You aren't enquiring into that kind of thing. And as to your accusation—if it is an accusation—about myself, I protest most strongly——"

"I will put it another way if you like," said Cheviot. "Where did you spend the night of the last Sunday but one before your mother's death?"

For a moment Charles did not answer. "I don't in the least see what that has got to do with your case," he said at last, "but I suppose there's no harm in your knowing that. I went out in the car on Sunday morning and ran round the Cotswolds. I meant to get back here the same evening, because I wanted to make an early start with my work on Monday. But the car broke down in Arkington, so I put up there for the night."

"At what hotel?"

"There's only one now—the Crown and Horse-shoes."

"Did the car work all right on Monday morning?"

"Of course not. I arranged for it to be seen to. I borrowed a bicycle for the six miles back to the farm."

"The car was repaired at the hotel garage, then, was it? All right, I can check that."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"You can certainly check it," said Charles. "I've just paid the bill."

"Now about Miss Salaman. She also was staying in that hotel that night. I take it she arrived before you did?"

"I didn't arrive till close on eleven. I don't know what time anybody else arrived. I don't see why I should answer these questions about what doesn't concern you. I haven't said anything about Miss Salaman."

"You certainly have," said Cheviot. "You told Mr. Church a very slanderous story concerning her. I have reason to believe that that story was true—as far as it went. But I want to know how you knew it."

"You seem to know a good deal," said Charles. "about people's private affairs. But you aren't going to learn any more from me."

"Then," retorted Cheviot, "I shall have to assume what seems most likely. You claim to know for a fact that Miss Salaman spent that night with a man in that hotel. I can think of only one way in which you could be so certain of that. As you refuse to give me any other explanation, I must assume that you know it because you are the man who was with her."

"My God!" cried Charles. "No, no. That isn't true. That's utterly false. A frightful idea! But if you are going to think that sort of thing, I suppose I'll have to tell you what happened. I don't see that I can help it, though I'd much rather not and I don't see—— Oh, all right. Well, I got to the hotel as I said at about eleven and went straight to bed. When I was putting my shoes outside the door, I saw Joan—she was quite unmistakable—going into a bedroom

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

on the opposite side of the corridor. She didn't see me. I was very much surprised, because I thought she had gone for a week-end at Berkhamsted. In fact, I was rather alarmed. In the morning, I got up early because I was cycling home before breakfast. But before I left I looked at the hotel register. Joan's name wasn't in it. There wasn't any name I recognized. But all the women there that night—there were only three of them—were apparently married women, sharing rooms with their husbands. So it seemed obvious——”

“I see,” said Cheviot. “You didn't see Miss Salaman in the morning?”

“No. I left too early.”

“And you didn't at any time see any man with her?”

“No. Only what I told you.”

“And you yourself booked a single room?”

“Yes. No. 18. You can check that, if you want to, from the register and with the hotel people.”

“I don't think I'll bother,” said Cheviot. “It is quite usual in these affairs, when secrecy is wanted, for the man to book a single room and the woman a double one. And you make no suggestion at all about who the man was—if he wasn't yourself?”

“I told you I didn't see him. But it might have been anyone. Joan doesn't stay cooped up in this place as we do. She goes about quite a lot. It might have been anyone she picked—met at a party.”

“I see,” said Cheviot again. “And apart from that vague suggestion you have nothing to tell me—nothing to support this claim that on very uncertain evidence (it doesn't affect the matter that it happened

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

to be justified by facts afterwards discovered) you told that slanderous story about Miss Salaman? Well, we'll go on to that. If you had acquired that information about her, and if you believed that interpretation of it, the decent thing would have been to keep it to yourself; but you didn't, you talked about it to Nevil Church. Are you telling me that that was just because you liked spreading a nasty story about a girl, or had you some other reason?"

"I didn't talk about it," answered Charles. "I only gave young Nevil a hint that Joan wasn't by any means the kind of girl he thought her. I didn't like doing it, but I had to, for his own good. He was making a complete fool of himself over her and heading for a nasty mess. Knowing what I did about her, it was my duty to head him off. I tried other ways, but they didn't have any effect, so I had to give him that hint of how things stood. I put it in a way that more or less forced him to keep it to himself. In fact I can't think how you found out about it."

"Oh," said Cheviot. "So that's your explanation. 'For his own good,' was it? Well, I can think of a much more convincing explanation, Mr. Vance. Mine is that you were having this affair yourself with Miss Salaman; consequently you didn't at all like to see a young man half your age—and more or less her age—making up to her and apparently making a little headway; so, not for his good but for your own, you warned him to keep off private ground. I suggest that when he didn't take the warning, you hinted at the real state of affairs, so that he would be certain to leave the girl alone."

Charles gasped. Then he said, "What absolute

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

nonsense! It is preposterous that you can come and make all these absurd charges. There is no more truth in them—not one word—than there is in the accusation that I killed my mother.”

“I daresay there isn’t,” said Cheviot, “if you put it like that. So now we’ll come to your mother’s murder. You said a minute ago that you couldn’t think how I had found out what you told Mr. Church. But of course you know that quite well. You know that he passed the story on to your mother. She of course had noticed your infatuation for Miss Salaman, though she didn’t think you had gone to the length of a night in a hotel with her. In fact, when she heard the story she said immediately ‘I never dreamt things were as bad as that.’ She was intensely worried about the matter and she came to you——”

“She didn’t,” cried Charles. “There isn’t a word of truth in this. I didn’t spent that night with Joan or any night with her, I am not in love with her, I have never given her a moment’s thought in that way. I only went to the hotel because my car broke down. I saw Joan there as I’ve told you. I spoke to Nevil only because it seemed to me necessary to save him from a lot of unhappiness later. I felt certain he wouldn’t talk about it and I don’t believe he did. Certainly my mother never discussed it with me. And as for my having killed her, it—it—it’s a damnable lie, like all the rest of this.”

“I didn’t expect you to confess,” said Cheviot. “At any rate not at this stage, when you don’t realize how complete is my case against you. Your mother came and told you, Vance, that she knew how you had behaved with Miss Salaman. Naturally she was very

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

much upset about it and I suppose she begged you not to have anything more to do with the girl. You wouldn't agree to that, and then she tried to put pressure on you. She told you that if you wouldn't go away and promise not to see Miss Salaman again she would leave you out of her will."

Charles suddenly laughed. It was very different from the kind of laugh we had had from Bryan Malcolm, it was more natural and based, as far as I could judge, on surprise. At any rate, that is what it sounded like.

"Nothing," he said, "could possibly be further from the truth."

"Then," Cheviot went on, "you realized that your mother must die before she altered her will. You thought out the scheme for poisoning her through her medicine. But you hated the idea of killing your mother and you hoped you might be able to persuade her still to leave you the £8,000. If you couldn't, you would kill her, so you had to make your preparations: but you wouldn't do it before she showed you it was absolutely necessary. So you prepared a bottle exactly like that containing her medicine. You hid it, meaning if the worst came to the worst to put poison in it and exchange it for the one that came from the doctor.

"Then Bryan Malcolm produced his financial scheme and started badgering you to ask your mother to promise you the money at once. He thought you were putting off asking her. You have told me since that you had to choose the right moment. But of course the question was not whether you could get the money when you wanted it but whether you would get it at all.

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

"Finally, you couldn't stand the strain any longer and you went and asked her point-blank what she was going to do. That was at five o'clock on the day she died. She didn't give you the answer you wanted, she insisted that the will would be altered. So having by that time decided to use cyanide for the poison, and having taken some from the dark room, you substituted the poisoned bottle for the one on the mantel-piece. And when she took the next dose, at eight o'clock that evening, she died."

Cheviot stopped. And for my part I must say I was glad he did, because it seemed to me that there was a serious flaw in all this. It was extremely ingenious, as Cheviot's theories always are, but it missed something. It didn't account for the fact, on which he had insisted most strongly in the case of Bryan, that the poisoning had been carefully timed to take place when Mrs. Vance took the thirteenth dose of her medicine. He had told Bryan that the exchange of bottles could not be made when the original bottle was either three-quarters full or only one-quarter full: it could only be done when twelve doses had been taken. That meant, he had insisted, that if Mrs. Vance had taken her medicine regularly she would have died after breakfast on April 7th, but as she missed two doses she died after dinner on that day. And the murderer must have planned all along for that date.

That was the essential thing in his whole argument with Bryan. But now he was saying that Charles had prepared a scheme which could be put in hand at any time: he implied that if Mrs. Vance had written a letter to her solicitors, Charles would have

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

poisoned her at once, before the letter could be posted, whether the amount of medicine then remaining was eighteen doses or six doses or anything else.

I tore a leaf out of my notebook and scribbled that down, passing it to Cheviot. By that time Charles, not laughing now, was protesting again that he was completely innocent, and Cheviot, interrupting him, was pointing out that no one except Joan and himself had been away from the farm that Sunday night. He didn't take any notice of me and my note at first, but when I leaned forward and jogged his arm he picked it up impatiently and read it.

As far as I could see, it shook him rather badly. He looked as if he read it through three times. Then he said, in rather a different voice, "Well, Mr. Vance, instead of protesting so much, suppose you give me your version of what happened. It is no good telling me that Mr. Church didn't pass on the story about Miss Salaman to your mother: he admits he did, and moreover Miss Salaman admits that your mother spoke to her about it. You say she didn't speak to you about that. Then what happened at your various talks with her—and particularly at the last one, at five o'clock on April 7th?"

Charles apparently hadn't missed the change of tone, slight as it was. At any rate he sounded a little more confident.

"I can tell you that exactly," he said. "I went into the common-room and said 'Look here, Mouska'—I've always called her that, ever since I was a baby—'I want you to do something for me, it's rather important.' Then I told her that I thought when Salaman retired, or soon afterwards, he would go right

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

out of the Unit, selling his shares. I said that Bryan proposed to get a friend of his to buy them, but meanwhile it would strengthen my position a lot if I had a real holding in the Unit, and Bryan thought there would be an opportunity, as soon as he was managing director, for me to come in if I had the money. I was never very clear how Bryan meant to work it, and I told my mother so, but I said that it was presumably a sound scheme. She said she knew she wasn't going to want the money herself much longer and of course I could have it when I wanted it. Then she said, 'But I'd be very much surprised, Charles, if Mr. Salaman gave up all his interest in the Unit. It would be quite unlike him. And I think Bryan ought to speak to me about this scheme, before you invest such a big sum of money.' And then she said, rather inconsequently——"

Cheviot said sharply, "Wait a minute. Did she actually say that?"

"Yes, I remember it very clearly."

"Oh," said Cheviot. He jumped to his feet. "Stay here," he cried, apparently to me. "I shan't be long. That, if it is correct, might lead me somewhere."

When he came back five minutes later, he was in a great state of excitement. "I've got it all," he cried. Then he went up to Charles and said, "Mr. Vance, I've made a big mistake. You're cleared. I'm sorry. I was wrong about that night at Arkington."

"Thank God you've realized it," said Charles. "But in that case who——"

Cheviot said, "Miss Salaman wasn't with one of her 'pick-ups.' She was with Bryan Malcolm. And then he murdered your mother."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Charles said "Ah!" It was like a sigh. For a moment he was silent. Then he said, "I was always afraid he did. But it seemed unbelievable. Why—why did he do it?"

"Because he didn't want to lose the benefits of his scheme for controlling the Unit and making a fortune out of it. There was still time for Salaman to kick him out before he became a director. And that would certainly have happened when Salaman heard that he had slept with Joan."

"But I can't imagine my mother telling Salaman," Charles objected. "She thought him a dreadful hypocrite and thoroughly disliked him."

"She wouldn't have told Salaman," Cheviot agreed. "She told Joan she wasn't going to. But she thought it was all Bryan's fault—the married man seducing the innocent child, and all that—and she was going to tell Mrs. Malcolm. Whatever Mrs. Malcolm did about it, *she* wouldn't have kept it a secret. Salaman would have heard of it at once. Then exit Bryan from the Unit."

"Nevil told your mother as much as he knew about Arkington," Cheviot went on, "and apparently she guessed the rest—that Bryan was the man—at once. She challenged them both. Miss Salaman has just told me that: to get my proof, I had to be certain that Bryan had heard that Mrs. Vance knew what he had done, and that he had also heard that his wife was going to be told. There'll be no doubt about that, with Joan in the witness-box. But I can't think how your mother knew, or guessed, that it was Bryan, Mr. Vance. Nobody but Miss Salaman and yourself was supposed to be out that night."

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

Charles said quietly, "She heard everything—and so did I when I was there—that happened in the flat above ours. If Bryan slipped out in the night she would have been bound to hear him."

"Ah," said Cheviot. "I shouldn't have missed that. I remember you said something at breakfast about hearing noises in those flats."

"But why didn't Bryan kill her at once?" I asked, since that was where he had gone wrong before.

"There was no hurry," Cheviot explained, "as long as his wife was away. He made all his plans and preparations, but put the actual deed off as long as possible. You remember, Ross, that Mrs. Malcolm said he lacked backbone and did not readily put his plans into effect. He probably hoped till the last that he could persuade Mrs. Vance to keep the secret, so that he needn't kill her after all—and that was why he continued with his scheme for getting the money promised to Mr. Vance if Mrs. Vance remained alive. I should call Bryan Malcolm a most unwilling murderer—but a cunning and ingenious one after the fact. But in spite of his ingenuity he made two slips. The first was in forgetting to add essence of almonds to the bottle of medicine and cyanide left for us to discover. The second was in his way out of the trouble he was put into by Nevil Church overhearing Mrs. Vance's words to him, 'I know you so well, I can't think you would do such a thing.' He explained that very cleverly by saying it was her retort when he told her about his financial scheme. The chance he took was that I should check up with Mr. Vance and find out what I only learnt a few minutes ago—that she hadn't heard of the scheme. She cannot have

Death in the Thirteenth Dose

been referring to that; of course she was referring to the Arkington incident, and no doubt that was when Bryan finally decided to murder her without delay."

Cheviot said in a tired voice, "Oh well, that's that. Come on, Ross, we'll have to get the beastly business over." Then, in quite a human way, he added, "I like the chase, but not the kill. I enjoy detecting murderers—but I hate arresting them."

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